Chicken Poop for the Soil

Wit and Wisdom from The Humble Farmer

Robert Karl Skoglund

Chicken Poop for the Soil

Wit and Wisdom

from the Humble Farmer

Robert Karl Skoglund

Copyright © by Robert Karl Skoglund, 2018

Cover image © by Jim Parker

Editing, page layout, and cover design by Duane Hanselman

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Chicken Poop for the Soil

About the Author 1
Introduction 5
Chicken Poop for the Soil 7
No Nonsense 9
Crime and Punishment 11
Gone to Jail 23
Crime 31
Sound, Basic Procedures 37
Some TV Commentary 39
Ghosts of Christmas Past 47
Modern Senior Citizens 49
Maine Summer Camp 51
Organizing Belfast Schools 55
The Almost Perfect Woman 57
The Cat Couldn't Appeal 61
He Who Laugh, Lasts 63
Gramp Wiley Has Most of the Answers 65
Rants 67
More Rants 85
Yet More Rants 105

The humble Farmer's Fields & gardens 111
The Blue Hill Fair 119
Biological Determinism 121
The humble Farmer's Home & Hearth 123
Maine Divorce Court 135
Smart Women at Home 137
The Almost Perfect Woman 139
Santa Something 147
The humble Farmer's Foreign Affairs 149
Foreign Travel 157
Experience a Full Game Situation 167
News 169
The humble Farmer's Survival of the Fittest 171
Social Commentary 201
Gramp Wiley Jumps to Conclusions 211
Save the Pterodactyls 213
Pets Raise Latchkey Kids 215
Worry 217
The Women's Club 219
Building in Maine on Retirement Income 221
Dealing with Stress 223
Implementing the Curriculum 225
The humble Farmer's Flight of Fancy 227
The Newspaper Column Venus 233
Telephone Tag 237
Elementary Observations 239
How Dry is Dry? 241
The humble Farmer's Friends & Neighbors 245

Humor and Aging 261
People from Away 265
Andy Wyeth is Trying to Save 273
Life in the Breakdown Lane 275
The Car Shuffle 277
The Deep Monhegan Blues 279

~ About the Author ~

Robert Karl Skoglund, perhaps better known to Maine Public Radio listeners as "***The humble Farmer***," or even more simply as "***humble***," lives in St. George Maine where he was born, brought up, and still lives.

Educated in St. George schools and at colleges in Potsdam, Gorham, and the University of Maine, humble was an NDEA fellow at the University of Rochester where he earned a graduate degree in linguistics. While at Rochester, he represented United States graduate students at the Tenth International Congress of Linguists in Bucharest. When picking up his grant money in Bucharest, he asked to meet the other U. S. delegates, and was told, "There is but one delegate from each country." Amazed, Skoglund said, "You mean I'm representing Yale, Harvard, MIT, and Machias State? Why did you pick me?" Dr. Mohrmon looked him up and down and replied, "Perhaps you were the only one who applied."

Skoglund has been profiled in *Yankee* magazine and featured in a *Boston Herald* cover story, which called him, "*New England's answer to Garrison Keillor.*" A tireless recorder of dry wit, his humor has been proven in over fifty newspapers in the United States and Canada. Humble has spoken at the Fifth International Conference on Humor in Cork, Ireland, WHIMSY (humor) conferences in Tempe, and at several U. S. Press Associations. While speaking at Nijenrode University, he almost died from Holland's ubiquitous second hand cigarette smoke. He is featured on "*Maine, A Video Tour*" which, years ago, was available in L. L. Bean's and eighty other Maine outlets. Fifteen hours of his stories are available on CDs. A television commercial he produced, wrote, and narrated was awarded "*Best of Show*" by the Advertising Club of Greater Portland Maine. For twenty-nine years humble's radio program, a mixture of "old fashioned music" and humorous social commentary, was broadcast on Maine Public Radio. It is now run here and there. He continues to speak whenever opportunities arise.

At fifty-five, the old dodderer married an attractive young widow, Marsha van Zandbergen, for her health insurance benefits: when men over fifty get married, it is their brain that makes the decision. Humble

found a woman who could augment his zest for rural living: the kind of woman who, if you get up to trot out to the privy at 2AM, has made your side of the bed before you can get back. Their marriage, which was covered extensively by Sam Pennington's *Antique Digest*, is one of Maine's great success stories and Marsha grows even more ravishingly robust each day.

But life was not always this simple for the self-effacing farmer. Almost thirty years ago, his editor wife went down to Beal's Island where she wrote an article for *Down East* magazine: "*Ossie Beal: Maine's Most Active Lobsterman.*" She never returned home.

For the first year afterward humble made Thoreau look like Martha Stewart, but living alone finally encouraged him to put in running water. Because the academic humble had better things to do than wash pans and dishes, the only thing he ate at home for the next twenty years was rolled oats for breakfast and spaghetti for dinner and supper. We will save his rolled oats recipe for the next book, but here, for those with a refined cosmopolitan palate, is

The humble Farmer's Spaghetti for the Single Maine Person

1 box of spaghetti
2 quarts of water
1 bottle of Ragu, Meatless Spaghetti Sauce
1 green box of Kraft grated Parmesan cheese

Bring two quarts of water to a boil in one of those blue double boiler colander things—the top one has holes in it. Put in only as much spaghetti as you want to eat right then.

Do not break spaghetti. Stand over it and swirl it with your fork—be careful and spaghetti won't poke out the little holes.

As the bottom part of the spaghetti gets soft, the rest gently sags like a frozen rag into the boiling water. Reduce heat so it doesn't boil over.

Set timer for twelve minutes and read *Maine Times* Personals, *e.g.*, "*Antique dealer seeks attractive young woman interested in one night stand.*" "*Ornithologist seeks attractive young woman willing to sacrifice everything for a few cheep thrills.*"

Shut off heat, lug double boiler over to the sink, lift out top part and slowly dump spaghetti on plate that came from Sicily and bears the inscription: "Ristorante Borgia."

Open bottle of Ragu meatless spaghetti sauce and pour just the right amount of cold sauce onto the hot spaghetti.

By the time you shake on some Kraft grated cheese the spaghetti is room temperature, and you can get the whole business into you in about two minutes standing right there at the kitchen counter by the sink looking out at the apple trees.

Do not move feet. Lean to the left and rinse off plate, fork and spoon under the faucet. *Double boiler does not require washing.*

A single man easily finds room to put the cheese and sauce back in the refrigerator because there is nothing else in there but a gallon of skim milk.

Leave plate, fork and spoon on the counter because you will use them in another three hours for perhaps the 9,000th time.

Any single Maine woman seeking male companionship might also profit by this recipe because

Boys like girls who live on Tab
But men want something they can grab.

If you wanted to prove in court that I typify the moderate Maine man, you might exhibit this story. It took me twenty-six years from the time I wrote it to get it between the covers of a book.

~ Introduction ~

Have you ever wondered how people write books? You have to have to have something that you want to say—it doesn't need to be important—and then you sit down at the computer and type. And when you've finished people look at you and say, "I never thought ***he*** was smart enough to write a book." Of course, you don't tell them that a clever editor threw away half of it and arranged the rest.

I was usually stacking firewood or driving my tractor whenever I thought of something I'd like you to know about. And by the time I'd brought in the wood or finished mowing the field, I was too tired to write down whatever it was I wanted to tell you. A whole lot of valuable literature was lost to the world simply because my thyroid isn't up to snuff.

But today I loaded up the pickup with dry fir and backed it up to the cellar door. And I hadn't worked in the hot sun too terribly long before I got to thinking that right now would be a good time to go up into my air conditioned office and work on your book. My project was even more difficult than simply writing, however, because I had to convince myself I had created order out of the thousands of scraps I'd already written.

For perhaps fifteen years, my column appeared in over fifty newspapers. I wrote humorous fiction. That means I made up wild, improbable stories about people who didn't exist. I learned to get my facts straight while writing this fiction, because otherwise the people who had been there when it happened used to call up and complain.

Many insecure men feel they have to dedicate their books to their wives, "without whose patience, support and understanding this could never have been written."

But my wife, Marsha, who lives on five hours sleep, has no way of understanding why I need eight. And how much patience do would you expect to find in a woman whose idea of a leisurely afternoon is manicuring two acres of lawn with a push mower? Marsha is supportive, however. No matter what project I'm finishing up for her, she is sure to say, "You've done a fantastic job, and when you're finished you can..."

Marsha was a widow. I call her The Almost Perfect Woman. If you read far enough, you might find out why. She has two daughters who graduated from the University of Maine. Tamar, the youngest, married her Camden high school sweetheart, Josh. They now live in Fort Kent, where Josh is a forester for Irving and Tamar teaches third grade. Alison, the oldest, is an RN who did her best to marry rich. They do triathlons. Her husband Aaron can, with the palms of his hands, hold sheetrock on an eight-foot ceiling while I stand on a chair and put in the screws. He plays cello and is some kind of a chemical/mechanical guru for Fairchild.

On June 22, 1991, on Alison's eighteenth birthday, Marsha and I stood on a platform that used to be the doorstep to Gramp Wiley's trailer, and got married right next to the kitchen window on our back lawn.

One of Marsha's minister friends from Connecticut performed the ceremony. You can learn a lot getting married. Half way through the ceremony he smiled at our assembled friends and said, "One evening while Marsha and I were lying on a beach in Puerto Rico..."

You might find it strange that I can write hundreds of newspaper columns and television scripts but can't seem to write a book. The answer is simple and it has to do with time. A newspaper column will write itself in two or three hours, after which I can have dinner or supper or go to bed. But if I can't finish what I'm writing in a single sitting I forget where I was going, and when I come back I have to start all over again.

Among my notes I find a promising beginning to a mystery novel. As I progressed, it would have been fleshed out with intrigue and suspense. Obviously inspired when I started, it was probably nipped off by a friend who stopped by to store his boat in my barn. Even more likely, I fell asleep while writing it.

~ Chicken Poop for the Soil ~

It is only within the past few days that an insensitive press has brought to light a somewhat distorted version of the recent mysterious happenings at the Port Clyde Seacoast Lobster Pound. Blackie's three clawed blue lobster is definitely gone, there is no longer anything to be gained by silence, and I now feel obligated to lay the true facts before the public that everyone may know the role my uniquely talented friend and neighbor Gramp Wiley played in clearing up the matter.

A northeast wind tugged at an already twisted aluminum storm door as I entered Gramp's green trailer, followed by a blast of rain mixed with wet, sticky snow. It was a perfect April afternoon in Maine.

Gramp, who sat in his rocker by the window pretending to read *The Wall Street Journal*, didn't look up but continued to tuck the last corner of a dog-eared *Playboy* magazine beneath his cushion.

"How were things over at Matson's?" he asked.

I shook my head and laughed. "Can't do nothing but what everyone in town hears about it on the CB."

"My CB's been over to Jim Elwell's for repairs since Monday," Gramp growled. "Matson has the only white faced Herefords this side of Wytopitlock. I can distinguish thirty seven breeds of cattle simply by the smell of their manure and have even been guilty of several insignificant monographs on the topic. It is your boots that have given you away, Robert. But, had you left your boots outside, there is a smudge on your left index finger that obviously...

Chicken Poop For the Soil

Last week I hauled tons of manure out of a neighbor's henhouse. After dumping several truckloads of rich potential soil on my garden, a Christmassy feeling of generosity welled up in my throat. Resolved to share a ton of wealth with my old neighbor, Gramp Wiley, I drove into his dooryard.

Maine farmers are born shrewd and he eyed the load with studied indifference.

"I brought you some chicken poop for your soil," I said with a proud smile.

"Hmmmm. That stuff might to disrupt the natural system I've got here. At present my pH content is just right."

He had never talked about the "natural system" or "pH content" before so I raised my eyebrows. "Who you been talking to?" I asked.

"Well, my hippy friends taught me a lot about gardening this summer. They have the best vegetables in town. They were good enough to check my soil and told me it already has enough potash, phosphorus and trace minerals like sulfur and molybdenum."

I couldn't find any fault with that. All I know about gardening is clean out the henhouse and dump the mungus where you plan to plant the crops. I tried to look wise and said, "Huh," as I stroked my chin.

"They told me to stay away from the dichlorovinyl dimethyl phosphates and to spray only with pyrethrins," he said.

I started to move back toward my truck. The lump in my throat that comes from cheerful giving had gone.

"I do need more humus," he continued, "but chicken manure might be too strong and kill my good angleworms. It could also bring in aphids and cutworms. It might encourage slugs and weeds. I'm afraid you'll have to sell that load to someone who doesn't care what he does to his soil."

"Oh I'm sorry you misunderstood me," I said with surprise. "This is free. I wanted to give it to you."

"It's free?" he said as he looked over my shoulder. "Back right over by my compost heap and dump her right there. My grandfather always said there ain't nothing that'll raise bigger squash than chicken manure."

~ No Nonsense ~

Paul had trouble finding a night clerk to work at his new motel. Several people applied for the job but none of them could sit behind the desk from midnight until 8AM without getting bored.

The young people he hired would sit alone an evening or two, but by the third night they'd bring in friends. Guests grumbled about the party noise until Paul realized his young helpers weren't worth keeping.

Then a soft-spoken old gentleman offered to stand the night watch. But the old gentleman partied by himself and would sometimes be found asleep on top of a ringing telephone switchboard.

Paul found the answer to a motel owner's prayer in Aunt Sally, a retired librarian, who seemed delighted at the idea of having something exciting to do. Her many years as a librarian had given her a brisk no nonsense manner and a disdain for inefficiency or wasting time. When she wasn't housekeeping in the lobby, she spent the long night hours studying a loose-leaf notebook full of tips on motel management.

She was reading it at 2AM when a bearded young man entered the lobby, pointed a pistol and her, and said, "Open the cash register."

Aunt Sally looked down at the notebook in her lap and said, "Let me see, Robbery procedures. That is in section C, I believe," and she skillfully flipped the pages.

"Yes. Here it is. 'Robbery Procedures. During: 1. Make no sudden moves. 2. Remain calm—be polite. 3. Do exactly as instructed: If robber asks for a certain amount of money—count it out to him.' How much money was it you said you wanted, young man?"

The robber looked at the gun in his hand and shifted his feet nervously. "All of it, I guess," he mumbled with some hesitation.

"Wait," replied Aunt Sally as she jabbed her finger at the printed page. "We have to go by the regulations. Here is says, '4. Try to observe: man or woman, height (as measured against counter top.)' Young man, would you mind standing over there against the counter?"

She spoke with the voice of years of unquestioned authority and the robber found himself moving over to the front desk.

"Try to associate the face to a familiar item (fish, horse face, etc.)" said Aunt Sally.

"I don't know if I've ever thought of myself like that," said the robber. "I've been told that I have a nice honest face."

"'5. Weapon'" continued Aunt Sally. "'Was it visible or hidden in pocket. Knife length, description.'"

"That doesn't apply," said the robber as he moved around to where he could read over her shoulder. "I can't imagine anyone trying to hold up a motel with a knife. Just thinking about it makes me sick."

"Young man, don't you know it's very impolite to read over someone's shoulder. '6. Does robber walk normal, with limp, run, etc.' Walk over to the door and back. Quickly please. There's much more to this and I'd like to finish before Paul comes in at 8. 'After Robbery. Robber may have you lie on floor.' Young man..."

"Now that part's wrong," exclaimed the robber. "I usually just take the money and run."

"That brings us up to 'The Getaway Vehicle.' Are you in a car or truck?"

"My wife's got the car," confessed the robber. "I had to come over in the truck. I don't even like to use the darn thing. It's all rusted out around the front fenders from all the salt they put on the roads around here."

"Section Two says, 'Immediately notify police 8876, owner 7878, and manager 9989. Record every detail before it gets cold.'"

"Excuse me, but my wife is expecting me. I should have been out of here a long time ago."

"Wait! 'Completely cover any area the robber may have touched. Door knobs, Counter Tops.' I didn't notice that you touched anything. Here, take a sip of this orange juice. Perry Mason always finds fingerprints on glasses. 'Try to determine how much was taken—cash up.'"

"I've changed my mind. I've really got to be going. I hope you won't say anything about this."

"How can I?" snapped Aunt Sally. "It says right here, 'Under no circumstances should a robbery be discussed with reporters.'"

~ Crime and Punishment ~

When I was sitting in the Knox County Courthouse hoping to be selected for jury duty, people were asked to stand if they or a close family member had been involved in an incident involving alcohol. Twenty or so stood. The judge asked one man, "Was it you or a family member who was involved in this incident," and the man said, "It was me and I still think I was innocent."

~

A Rockland man is resting comfortably in Pen Bay hospital after a $52,000 heart bypass operation, and will be returned to the county jail in a week, according to jail administrators.

This man experienced severe chest pains last Thursday afternoon and knew that he was having a heart attack.

Realizing that he could never pay for his medical expenses, he quickly dialed 911, dragged himself out of the house, and, with his last ounce of remaining strength, emptied his pistol into the windows of the vacant house next door.

He was immediately arrested for illegal discharge of a firearm and taken to the hospital. Because he was a prisoner at the time, taxpayers will be presented with his medical bill.

According to my friend lawyer Crandall, case law indicates that the county is responsible for these bills. Look for more of them in the immediate future.

~

Last Thursday Sheriff Dan Davey responded to a 9-1-1 call from a housewife in St. George who was being crushed up against her wall phone by an oven that had overflowed with Fudge Brownie Mix.

It seems that the woman was confused by the directions on the back of the box, which were in the metric system. That is, the pan is supposed

to be 33 by 23 by 5 cm and you will need 110 ml of water and 55 ml of Vegetable oil. The only thing she found in common with the metric system was the one egg.

It took Sheriff Davey and Deputy John Carroll several extra hours to free the woman because, according to the directions on the box, the brownies had to be cut into 4 by 5 cm squares before eating.

~

Here is some news that was emailed to me by Marsha's aunt. Keep an eye out for people that have a cell phone in hand near you at retail stores, restaurants, grocery stores, etc. With the new camera cell phones, they can take a picture of your credit card, which gives them your name, number, and expiration date. Identification theft is one of the fastest growing scams today, and this is just another example of the means that are being used. So... be aware of your surroundings.

Now, do you think that the media should broadcast warnings about these scams? Does it put people on their guard, or does it outline in detail exciting new opportunities for scammers who aren't bright enough to think up techno-crimes on their own?

~

Have you ever heard of an adult who didn't mind growing older, slower and more forgetful? You might have seen the one who grabbed headlines in the paper last week when he crashed his small plane. The sheriff found a very large amount of cash scattered around the crash site but the poor old pilot couldn't remember where he got the money or what he was going to do with it. The drug enforcement administration and the income tax people have been looking into the situation. The most reasonable explanation anyone has come up with so far, is that he was on his way to Lewiston to make his monthly health insurance payment.

~

Have you noticed that if you pay your telephone bill one day late, they tack on a couple of extra bucks? And you pay it and you don't say anything about it because you know that you did pay the bill late and you know that the system is set up to squeeze every possible cent out of you, the customer. But when water gets into the telephone company wires so you have no phone service for a day, and you lose a lot of business because your customers were unable to reach you, does it say on the bottom of your next bill: "here's a couple of bucks rebate for your service that was suspended for a day." It is my understanding that telephone companies will start giving rebates when their equipment breaks down—on the same day that insurance companies start giving refunds on canceled policies.

~

In response to my comments about road rage, a radio friend sent me a table that ranks the states due to aggressive driving. The ultimate measurement is deaths per 100,000. Here are the twenty-four most aggressive states. It starts out with the most dangerous one, South Carolina, where 15 drivers out of 100,000 got blown away because of road rage.

1 South Carolina 15.1

2 Wyoming 13.9

3 Alabama 13.7

4 Kansas 13.7

5 Oklahoma 13.6

6 New Mexico 12.9

7 North Carolina 12.4

8 Arkansas 12.4

9 Idaho 11.9

10 Florida 11.7

11 Missouri 10.8

12 Mississippi 10.5

13 Tennessee 10.2

14 Montana 10.2

15 Texas 9.9

16 Arizona 9.8

17 Utah 9.7

18 Nevada 9.7

19 North Dakota 9.6

20 South Dakota 9.6

21 Georgia 9.4

22 Colorado 9.3

23 Kentucky 9.0

24 Nebraska 8.7

Blow them away. Yippi Ki Oh Ki A

And here are the six states where you are least likely to get shot because of road rage.

45 Connecticut 4.5

46 New Jersey 4.1

47 New Hampshire 4.1

48 New York 3.7

49 Massachusetts 3.3

50 Rhode Island 3.1

You just read two lists of the states where enraged people are or are not likely to whip out a gun and shoot you. Did you notice that it might also give you a hint of how they might vote in a presidential election?

~

Why do some girls fall in love with bad guys? Does it run in the family? Is it because their mothers did the same thing? Every rational person in the community can see that he's as bad as they come, but nothing you can say to her and nothing he does ever changes her mind. Love is irrational. Love is blind. He might be a mafia chief or the leader of a street gang. He gives orders to kill people. Tell her that nice guys don't send out hit men and she'll say that he's really a wonderful man who has evil enemies. He's only defending his neighborhood.

Yes, it does have rather indefinite parameters, but others are to blame because they make him do the things that he does. Ask her why he and his band of robbers, who already have so much, feel they need to steal even more. She'll tell you that he's a family man who provides for his friends and his family: they are simply engaged in a more equitable redistribution of wealth.—You realize, of course, that there would be no country and western songs if every community did not have at least one of these very messed up wives who blindly stands by her very bad man. Your community survives in spite of her. But can you imagine what would happen if 51 percent of the women in this country were to vote that way in an election?

~

The police chief was front page news last week. Since then I've been asking myself why we expect the perfection in an official that it would be impossible to find in our friends or ourselves. You will remember Dirty Harry's problem—he shot armed robbers and psychopathic killers on the spot instead of taking them in for evaluation and counseling. If your police chief caught every crook in your county and put them in jail, does it matter if he is willing to tolerate petty bickering in his own department?

Is it human nature to never know when you're well off? No matter how good it gets, why do we continually demand more? Why do we long for an unattainable perfection?

Suppose your husband is a handsome, brilliant hunk who owns a big company that he built himself. His neighbors love him, his employees

have never had it better, and everything is perfect at home, as long as you overlook his last-gasp dalliance with a young secretary. Seven out of eight isn't good enough for you, is it? Why, why, you ask yourself, couldn't you have married a man who was free from sin?

On the other hand, suppose your husband really isn't all that clever but was lucky enough to inherit his father's business. He reneges on his employee's retirement, cuts back the wages of the ones he doesn't fire, is always fighting with his neighbors, bankrupts his father's company after first robbing the stockholders, and then thanks God for keeping him free from sin. It is my understanding that there are now women out there who figure that only getting one out of eight is doing well.

~

Old people can be troublesome. Smart old people can cause more trouble than your average old person because smart old people can remember things. And many old people like to blab. I suppose they figure that being over ninety entitles them to tell the truth, no matter how many people don't want to hear it. So hear this. Once upon a time in a city far away some citizens thought it would be nice to raise a statue to a police officer who was gunned down in the line of duty seventy or so years ago. So they did. But a man who will never see ninety again laughed when he heard about it and said that the police officer was a bully. During the depression there would always be a few men loitering on the street corner for lack of anything better to do, and this policeman went out of his way to make their lives even more miserable than they already were. Instead of working quietly to help and protect his friends and neighbors like all policemen do nowadays, he enjoyed flaunting his authority. He enjoyed pushing people around. And one day, while approaching an individual he'd been leaning on pretty heavily, this man simply pulled out a gun and shot the policeman dead. Not a nice thing to do. I don't recommend it and I'm glad that kind of thing doesn't happen nowadays, aren't you? Anyway, before you raise up a monument to honor some long-gone public official, you might want to make sure that everyone who knew him is dead.

~

One of the most useful utensils in any Maine kitchen or newspaper office is the police scanner. From time to time you'll hear that a car has gone off the road, and many years ago John Parker told me that if you can get there before the police, you get to drink the beer the driver hid in the bushes. The other day my friend Art and his recently divorced editor were working in their newspaper office when they heard some lady from Somerville reporting an unwanted male in her home. She turned to Art, pushed back her chair, and said, "What's the shortest route to Somerville?"

~

Woman from away came into my place the other day to buy some of my tapes. I've got fifteen hours of my stories on tape or CDs and this woman got some of them a year or two ago. She wanted replacements, because someone had broken into her house and stole them. Who would have thought that criminals would stoop so low?

Just as if there aren't already enough crimes, someone is inventing new ones. People are now being fined in court for a crime I've never heard of. The crime is called "Bulk Pile." All it says in the Court Record is, "So & So, age 24, St. George, bulk pile ten percent undersize."

Can bulk pile be a very serious or important crime? I think not. Otherwise, when Moses came down off the mountain with the tablets, the eleventh commandment would have said, "Thou shalt not pile bulk."

~

The advertisement that came in my email said, "UNIVERSITY DEGREE PROGRAMS—Increase your personal prestige and money earning power through an advanced university degree. Eminent, non-accredited universities [there's an oxymoron if you ever heard one] will award you a degree for only $200. Degree granted based on your present knowledge and experience. No further effort necessary on your part. Just a short phone call is all that is required for a BA, MA, MBA, or Ph.D. diploma in the field of your choice. For details, call," such and such a number.

I wonder if they accept counterfeit money.

~

While clicking aimlessly through the channels, I stumbled on a program called Maury Povitch. Maury Povitch has guests who wonder about the parenthood of their children. He takes a DNA sample and within 48 hours mama knows who fathered her child. 48 hours. It reminded me that there are people in jail who have waited for years for the state to process some DNA that would prove their innocence, open the cell door and let them walk home. Wouldn't you think that every taxpayer would want to be rid of all those innocent prisoners who are taking up space? Do you know what it costs the state to keep an innocent person in jail for a year? Do you feel that this is an unnecessary expense? Maury Povitch can run the DNA test in 48 hours. It's an expensive test, yes, but not as expensive as what it costs to keep an innocent person in jail for a year. The test would pay for itself within a month or two.

I found this hard to believe when I first heard about it, but did you know that there is great opposition to letting innocent people out of jail? It makes sense when you think about it. The district attorneys and the judges who convicted these people on circumstantial evidence don't want to admit that the evidence they permitted the juries to hear was incomplete. What a waste of all their time and effort to have to let someone out of jail just because they are innocent. They're in there. They had a fair trial. It's a done deal. Let's forget about them. They consider it a black mark against their professional expertise. I would look at it exactly the opposite way. They are so proficient that they can even convince a jury to convict and lock up an innocent person. Of course judges and district attorneys are supported by all of their very powerful friends. So some of these cases where everyone finally realizes that the person was innocent become hot political footballs. No way is a district attorney, who wants to be governor, going to help an innocent person have a new trial or look at the DNA so they can get out of jail. What do you think about this DNA thing? DNA has helped put a lot of bad people in jail. But if you were convicted by jurors who were only permitted to hear half the circumstantial evidence long before this DNA testing was available to prove your innocence, you might as well forget about the attorney general. Send a note to Maury Povitch.

~

You saw that Martha Stewart served her six month prison sentence in a place that resembles an old fashioned college campus. What happened to the good old days when lawbreakers were chained to moldy walls in rat infested cells? Not that I wish that on anyone, least of all a woman whose televised demonstrations on the way life should be captivated my wife's father for years. But I do envy her present situation because she has time on her hands. How would you, right now, like to spend the next six months free from worldly care in a college dormitory with nothing to do but read and write? Yes, before you hear the next peeper in the swamp, Martha Stewart will have earned another five million dollars for her book on prison cuisine.

~

There is a very good chance that you are a genius. Being a genius means that you can immediately see unique and positive alternatives to many situations. Here's an example. One noon Julian Rubenstein and Lawyer Crandall and I were having dinner at Dave's Restaurant, when a great crowd of sheriff's deputies and state policemen came in for coffee and filled up the entire counter. Lawyer Crandall looked at all those policemen at the counter, and said that right then would be a very poor time to hold up Dave's Restaurant. Julian said that that was true, but it would be a very good time to hold up a bank in Thomaston.

~

Back before the days of sea legs when Maine restaurants made real lobster rolls, a real estate agent was asked to sell a house. This real estate agent was one hundred percent honest and he knew his business. When

it came to selling houses, there wasn't anyone this side of the County who could touch him. One day he got a call from a man in Boston who was going to come up from Boston on the train. He was going to arrive in Rockland at quarter past five, and he wanted to see that house.

At quarter past four on the appropriate afternoon the agent had his friends in the fire department come over and pump two tank loads of water into the well.

The Boston man was no fool, and he knew that unless wells were spring fed, they very often went dry in September and October. So his first question to the agent as they walked onto the property was, "How's the well hold out in the fall?"

As the agent slid the cover off the well he said, "Why not check it out for yourself?"

~

People from away do not fully understand what motivates Maine people to stand up at Town Meeting and argue for an hour on a $300 item and then appropriate $300,000 for road sand as quick as the moderator can bring the hammer down.

Back before we built a big town office, our town meeting used to be held in the Tenants Harbor Oddfellows Hall. Years ago the place used to be jam packed with people standing up along the walls, but nowadays usually only a few folks attend, and most of them just moved to town and want to find out about this town meeting thing. At a recent meeting the handful of natives argued for fifty minutes over $4,000 that would hire a town constable. Some of the people from away said that we needed a town constable and our own police car with a blue light on it. What the newcomers didn't understand was that the natives who stood up and said that we didn't need a town police man had waited years for a burglar to break into their house so they could shoot him.

~

Have you ever gone into court just to see what they do in there? If you go in to court day after day and just sit quietly and listen, you might see different people, but they all tell the judge about the same story. You get the impression that the judge doesn't even have to listen because he never hears anything new. There is no one smart enough to say anything that might surprise a judge. Judges have heard it all before. At least that's what I thought until I asked my friend, Lawyer Crandall, if he ever said anything in court that surprised a judge. And Lawyer Crandall said, "Yes, Skog, I have. I once said, 'Judge, my client is guilty.'"

~

Do you enjoy shopping in the midcoast area? Or do the people with whom you have to do business seem annoyed when they see you coming? Are they tired, impolite, indifferent or just plain rude? Do you often simply walk out quietly and spend your dollars elsewhere? It's sad but true that many people who own businesses in our area do not understand that they will increase their profits when they train their staff in customer service.

If you as a customer have received great service from a local business lately, please send us a letter telling us about the business so that we may compliment them next week.

Today we'd like to salute a former friend and neighbor who had a better grasp on customer service than anyone we ever knew.

Sadie Marcus had a furniture store in front of the Farnsworth Museum. You never saw a store with so much stuff in it. You couldn't drive a snake in that store with a hammer. When anybody asked her why she kept her store crammed full she always said her father told her you couldn't sell anything out of an empty wagon.

Every time I'd go in that store, Sadie would ask, "Who's your father?" You better believe Sadie didn't have anything against two party checks. Even if you were flat broke she'd insist that you take a lamp, or whatever you wanted, and pay for it later.

She never looked puzzled when you told her what you wanted. She never admitted that she didn't have it. If she didn't have a widge backed gizmo, she'd grab you right by the sleeve and drag you right over to something that she promised was even better and at a better price.

Everybody liked Sadie. You've got to admire a woman who quietly rolls up her sleeves and becomes very wealthy. Up until the day she died she never realized that the business community discriminates against women.

Oh, once the fire commissioner did take her to court for having such a cluttered store. He was quite a short fellow who got lost one day behind a stack of Sadie's mattresses. When he finally found his way out, he got to wondering what would have happened if the place burned down while he was lost in there.

Within a week, Sadie was in court listening quietly as the commissioner tried to describe her store to the judge.

When Sadie finally got on the stand she jabbed her finger at the fire commissioner and said, "That's what happens when a small man gets to wear brass buttons."

When everyone stopped laughing, the judge moved the court into Sadie's store to check things out firsthand. He smiled and shook his head as he walked sideways to squeeze through the narrow aisles.

At last he pointed at a lamp which was way over on top of a stack of rugs and bureaus and said, "Sadie, let's be reasonable. If I wanted to buy that lamp over there, how in the world would you ever get it down for me?"

Sadie tapped a table with her finger and said, "You put $20 right here judge and I'll show you."

~

You probably heard about that man they were executing down south somewhere. It seems as they didn't get his little hat on tight enough and when they pulled the switch, his head caught on fire. Some people were not pleased about the way things went, and caused a fuss. The reporter interviewed someone from—I can't remember the group—might have been Amnesty International, or something like that. And this person said, "The argument should not be how we execute somebody. The entire concept is flawed, because it is still the extinguishment of a human life by the state." This argument will soon be invalid—they will privatize it.

~

You tell me if this has ever happened to you.

I used to get some annoyed at a place in Rockland where I used to buy lobsters, because the first thing they'd do in that store was put a great big double paper bag on the scale, and both bags would be treated with something so they wouldn't leak water, and then they'd scoop a lobster out of the tank and drop it in that double bag. And then they'd scoop another dripping lobster out of the tank and put that in. And you'd look up, and there would be a four foot ceiling fan twirling like an airplane propeller over that bag, pushing it down onto the scale. And you'd end up paying who knows what for compressed air and salt water. Now people from away expect that kind of treatment. When they get home it gives them something to tell their friends about the quaint way people do business in Maine. But when you live here like you and I do, you already get more of that kind of local color on a regular basis than you can afford.

So one day when the clerk handed me the bag and told me how much I owed, I couldn't take it any more. I reached into the bag, took the two lobsters out, gave them back to him, and said, "I'll take them without the bag. Please weigh them again." And when he did, I found that the difference came to 85 cents. I was expected to pay 85 cents for paper bags, air and salt water.

And the clerk told me that the boss would be awful mad if he knew I did that. And I know why, because the man who owned that store used to brag to his friends that he'd paid for his Cadillac by selling salt water.

~

What's this from Greg Dorr? The Dopeler effect: The tendency of stupid ideas to seem smarter when they come at you rapidly. I want to tell you about Greg Dorr. I was in a jury pool one time, and you laugh when you hear me say that because you know that I can never get on any jury.—Because when they ask if anyone might have difficulty being objective if the situation involved alcohol, I have to stand up and eliminate myself. I might not have said that right, but you know what I mean. If you were drinking when you ran down that child, you don't want me on the jury. If you were drinking when you beat your wife, you don't want me on that jury. And about the only reason that most anyone in the world ever gets in trouble is because they were drinking. But I was in a jury pool one time and we were asked if we knew any of the lawyers involved in the case. And, although it was unusual in Rockland, I didn't. But then the district attorney said, "Your honor, I have played fiddle in a band at The humble Farmer's annual Free Lobster Picnic." And then I did remember that there was some young hippy fellow at the picnic in a pair of shorts who was playing fiddle, but he didn't look anything like that slick and polished district attorney I saw standing there in the courtroom. So I jumped up and in all honesty said, "Your honor, I swear here in court that I have never seen this man before in my life."

~ Gone to Jail ~

Rockland Police Chief Al Ockenfels said that the city's record low crime rate was caused by a change in demographics in the community. That's another way of saying that the one or two families who were responsible for thirty percent of Rockland's crime, had either gone to jail or moved out of town.

~

Every year hundreds of Maine people are fined in court for not having license plates or inspection stickers on their cars. Most of these people are horrified and embarrassed when brought to justice. And yet no allowance is made for their absentmindedness.

On the other hand, if a man murders his mother, the first thing the lawyers want to know is, was this man sane or was he crazy when he did it. You see, for this type of crime, your state of mind makes a difference. If you can prove that you were crazy when you killed someone, you can't be held accountable.

~

Here's your crime stoppers tip for the week, supplied by Rockland Police Chief Al Ockenfels. Leaving an outside light on to discourage criminals is better than shooting them: there's less paperwork.

~

Did you hear that the inmates in an Ohio prison want to unionize to make their wages compatible? They'll soon be walking around outside with signs claiming that the management is unfair. I can see a time coming when the only way to keep them in will be to lock them out.

~

A Union man was stopped by one of Sheriff Davey's deputies last week and told that he had a tail light out. The man said, "Thank goodness, I thought for sure you had me again for drunken driving."

~

Maine is one of the last two states to pass a seat belt law. The question has come up again and again. What kind of an advertising campaign could we have that would encourage kids to wear seat belts? I suggest that we have billboards of a cartoon camel buckling up.

~

One of the most interesting sections of the newspaper is the court record. Unfortunately, it only tells part of the story. You can't read the court record without wishing that you'd been right there so you'd know what really happened. Here's a man who placed another person in fear of bodily injury. Did he invite her to do a popular modern dance? Another man exercised unauthorized control of a parking meter. Is a parking meter something that a normal person would want to bend to his will?

I feel bad for the woman who was fined for theft of coffee, cat food, a movie, and juice. It really wouldn't take much to brighten up her life.

Another woman stole pepperoni, beef jerky, and cough drops. They probably had the cuffs on her before she could get the cigarettes in her bag.

It can cost you over $100 if you cause annoyance to others by engaging in a fight. The only people annoyed by George Forman were those who bet against him.

Here's a man who was jailed for drinking in public, although many of those who cry for liver transplants drank in private.

Another man was fined $500 for possessing a usable amount of marijuana. How do the authorities decide if a pile of marijuana is large enough to be usable? Did Mother Nature ever make a pile of manure so small that your plants rejected it as being unusable?

How do people get themselves into such awful messes? If you'd ever taught school, you wouldn't need to ask.

~

Crime seems to be moving in on all sides of us simply because nobody worries about being found guilty anymore. There is the my-father-abused-me, my-mother-abused-me excuse. The a-horse-stepped-on-my foot-when-I-was-ten excuse. There is the we-were-poor excuse. There is the we-were-rich excuse. How can you be guilty of a crime if you were

crazy at the time you so very carefully planned it? We can expect to see the drunken excuse very soon—he's a really nice guy. He wouldn't have done it if he'd been sober. And then there will be the hunger excuse. She's always cranky when she hasn't eaten. Or the I-ran-out-of-Prozac excuse. His wife did it because he refused to let her go on line. Where will it end?

~

Five Maine high school graduates were recently arrested for possession of alcohol at their chem-free graduation party. If your kid insists on attending a graduation chem-free party next June you might be wise to ask if there will be any alcohol or drugs there.

~

Even judges aren't exempt from crime. One was recently convicted of stealing a million dollars from poor clients. I suppose he did all right for what he had to work with.

~

A Maine man had himself intentionally convicted of selling drugs. He said that he could make more money dealing on the inside.

~

Guards at the Maine State Prison have asked that pool be replaced with ping-pong. But the warden is hesitating, and well he should. If they take out the pool tables, some prisoners might be released without having learned a trade.

~

I was told that seventy percent of the people in Sweden's jails are from other countries. If you'd like to learn several new languages, that seems like an inexpensive place to do it.

~

Rockland police now carry guns and a small can of spray stuff called Mace. According to the directions on the back of the can, Mace doesn't work on drunks, druggies or psychotics. That seems to exclude most everyone—unless you're attacked by the Osmonds.

~

Handguns predominate in firearms crime. More than three-quarters of the 83,000 guns used in crime that were traced for law enforcement agencies in 1994 were handguns.

Of course crooks commit crimes with handguns. Have you ever tried to walk into a bank with a shotgun in your pants?

~

Surveys of prison inmates show that they prefer concealable, large-caliber guns and that juvenile offenders appear to be more likely to possess semi-automatic weapons. This is obvious if you compare automatic guns with computers: kids are the only people who know how to use them.

~

I read in a study that twenty five percent of the people who murdered their parents had a family history of mental illness. The lesson here is very clear: if you suspect that any of your ancestors were crazy, don't have children.

~

They make a big deal about this mental illness thing when it comes to crime statistics. You can murder someone and be found innocent by reason of insanity. But if you murder someone, isn't it proof that you are crazy?

~

Here's more. In 1994 only thirty-seven percent of the people brought to trial for obstruction of justice were convicted. The percentage is probably this low because eighty-seven percent of them were judges.

~

Speaking of crime, Sheriff Davey says that all Knox County law enforcement agencies will have to adopt new written policies. These are guidelines for police officers.

You and I both hope that somewhere in those guidelines there is a paragraph that says, "Human nature being what it is, a guidelines book of 10,000 pages would not cover every incident of deviant behavior encountered by police officers. Be prepared every day for situations where you are simply going to have to use your own common sense."

~

Out of nine cases listed in the small claims court, eight of them found in favor of the plaintiff. That would indicate that in eight out of nine cases the plaintiff knew he had a pretty strong case before he came to court. Oh, in that one case where the judge found in favor of the defendant, both parties gave their address as the Maine State Prison.

~

Local law enforcement officers are glad that Maine criminals are technologically behind mainstream America—often by five or ten thousand

years. While New York police might have to dodge a hail of bullets from automatic weapons, Maine police might be struck with a clam hod or bitten on the hand.

~

Have you seen the large sign in Thomaston that says, "This is a crime watch community. We immediately report all suspicious persons to the police." Look for it the next time you're driving in Thomaston. You can't miss it. It's right in front of the state prison.

~

Did you hear that the warden of the Maine State Prison hopes to have inmates raising the meat and vegetables they eat? I can't image such a thing. Don't murderers, drug dealers, and child molesters have any rights at all? Who would *want* to go to jail if they knew they were going to have to work? And where do you suppose the warden got such a revolutionary modern idea? Does this mean that the baseball field out at the so-called Prison Farm will once again produce cabbages?

Before you know it, the warden will probably get the idea that inmates should even *have* to *earn* their room and board.

~

Over the past year most Maine people have seen enough courtroom scenes on TV to earn them a law degree. One of the things we have learned is that an accused person gets judged by a jury of his peers. That means people who look and think just like you do. It's a good system, because you're more likely to get off.

It makes you wonder how a young man with green hair and a ring in his nose can get a fair trial around here. You can't find a jury in Rockland that isn't made up of retired Maine State Prison guards.

~

When you're being considered for jury duty, you're asked if you have any opinions on the matter at hand. If you say, "Yes," the law says they can't use you. They only want people who have no opinions—no preconceived notions.

What *kind* of person can have lived thirty or sixty years without having any opinions? And how do you select a jury from the few who claim to have none? If a nice looking young man is accused, do you want nice looking young women on the jury? Would unattractive women automatically dislike him, knowing that he would never give them a second glance on the street? Would plain looking young men be jealous? Would sweet old grandmothers want to cover him with a protective wing?

If you are a man who has been selected for jury duty here on the coast of Maine, here's one bit of advice if you really want to fit in. The only two men in the courtroom wearing a tie will be the accused and his attorney.

~

Here on the coast of Maine we are very careful what we say to friends we haven't seen in a while. Ask them what they've been doing and they're likely to say, "Three to five for dope smuggling."

~

We read that one out of three young male African Americans in this country is in jail or on probation. Some say that this is because the system discriminates.

I'm going to tell you about a system that, in my opinion, discriminates along the same lines. I saw it while sitting on my front doorstep on Tuesday morning.

Deputy sheriff Ernie McIntosh had set up a radar detector right beside my mailbox. If you approached the radar detector at fifty miles per hour, you could read fifty miles per hour on the big screen on the trunk of his police car. And I could also see it from my front steps. I admit I was nosy, just like you would be, if there were something interesting going on within two feet of your mailbox. I noticed that some people who usually whale through there at fifty or sixty were lucky that day. They got stuck behind that old fuddy-duddy Donald Jacobson who was creeping through that thirty-five mile an hour zone at thirty-five miles an hour.

Oh, I started to tell you about the discrimination part. Just about two out of three of the drivers who were stopped for driving well over the speed limit were women.

~

You could probably keep from getting a speeding ticket if you had the right kind of license plate. Last month while I was down in New Hampshire, a car went by me like a shot. And the license plate said GIMPY. Is it possible that in this day and age a police officer would put a ticket on that car? In some parts of the world it would be an excuse to start a riot.

~

The fines for shoplifting, theft, assault on an officer and similar crimes are $100 or so. But fines for not having your insurance papers in your truck or for forgetting to register it are $200 or $300. Judging from the proportion of the fines, crimes against people are not considered serious as crimes against the bureaucracy.

~

I'm proud to live in Maine. Even crime in Maine distinguishes itself by being primitive and uncomplicated. In last week's court record, three different people were threatened or attacked with a pitchfork, a sword, and a clam rake.

~

A Camden man reports that he and his wife awoke the day after Christmas to find a man dressed like Santa Claus rummaging in a bureau. Although realizing that the intruder could be a robber, he let the man go, explaining, I've seen so many TV programs this week about Santa Claus miracles, I simply didn't dare shoot him.

~

Are you going to prison? Might I recommend that you first read a book called *A Practical Guide For the First Time Offender*? I stumbled into it out there in Internet world and thought that you might profit by a book designed to ease your transition to prison life. The woman who wrote it works all day in a three-by-eight foot booth making telephone calls.

~ Crime ~

A Camden woman, who had photographed a Port Clyde man allegedly shooting an eagle, lost her case in Superior Court today when lawyer Crandall pointed out that the Japanese camera was one over quota and had been brought in illegally. If convicted, the man could have gotten five years in jail—more time than most men serve for shooting their wives. Crandall mentioned, off the record, that this is probably because there are more wives than eagles.

~

Last week I was surprised to discover that lawyer Crandall didn't know the difference between the plaintiff and the defendant. He explained, "Well, to me they're all the same."

~

Help is available if you are having trouble collecting money that people owe you. I suppose you saw in the paper that the judge told that guy who rammed me that he'd have to buy me a new back bumper. But when I asked him for the money, he told me to go to the devil. So I called lawyer Crandall.

~

And then there is what we call white collar crime. The fines for these white collar crimes are higher than for armed robbery, because the people committing these crimes have the money to pay higher fines. The closest I ever came to committing a white collar crime was changing the numbers on a check. Well, they'd made a mistake with a check—they'd put two different numbers on it, so I went into my friend Lawyer Crandall's office, and showed him what I was going to do. I just changed it so that both numbers were the same—like they were supposed to be. You couldn't even see that I'd changed it. I didn't realize I'd done anything wrong until I mentioned it to my wife later that evening. Her eyes bugged right out and she said, "Did Lawyer Crandall tell you what can happen to

people who go around changing the numbers on checks?" I said, "Yes, he offered me a full partnership in his law firm."

~

You probably wonder how I dare talk about Lawyer Crandall like I do, but I want you to know that I am pretty careful what I say about him. Lawyers can be touchy. I once made the mistake of describing him as straightforward and honest. He claimed it almost ruined him—after that everyone questioned his effectiveness in court.

~

Have you seen this new combat thing on TV? I think they call it absolute fighting. It can get pretty messy because you can do whatever it takes to completely destroy your opponent. No holds are barred. You know, my friend Lawyer Crandall could be a world champion—he's been handling divorce cases for years.

~

One of the great things about my new hearing aids is being able to hear what people are talking about on the other side of the room. I recently heard a very ancient woman, who had been married to a lawyer, being complimented on her husband. He must have been one great guy because everyone had something good to say about him. She agreed. She said that one night she was roused out at 2AM by the bedside phone. Woman wanted to talk with her husband. He took the phone and listened a long time—said nothing but, "Yes, yes, I understand. No, it's OK, you can call me anytime."

She said, "I usually didn't ask him about his business, but this time I looked at him, and he said, 'She wants a divorce.'

"We no sooner got back to sleep when the phone rang again. Same woman. He took the phone and said, 'Yes, yes, I understand. No, it's OK. You can call me anytime.'

"I looked at him and said, 'I've got to know.'

"He said, 'She changed her mind.'"

~

Have you heard about the Miami Olympics? I spent last winter in southern Florida and can tell you that we have nothing like it here in Maine. One of the most popular contests is—Who can bribe the most Miami officials. This event will not be repeated at the next Miami Olympics because it's really not all that challenging. Who can rob the most jewelry stores is popular and very exciting, as many store owners now keep sawed off shotguns under the counter. Who can scam the most money from Old

People raised cries of foul from the Boston team because there are more old people in Florida with money to burn than there are in Boston. But if you've ever parked within 10 miles of Cambridge you won't be surprised to learn that the Boston crowd gave the Miami all-stars a wicked beating when it came to stealing the most cars.

~

Have you ever seen the advertisements for that red piece of metal that you lock on your steering wheel? It's an anti-theft device called the Club. Can you afford to buy one for your car? If you can, you don't live in a neighborhood where you need it.

~

This week we read that there's mess on the walls in the boy's room in a Maine school. The principal sent boys in to clean it up. Forty years ago you wouldn't have heard about it. But now you heard about it on the evening news because they weren't wearing rubber gloves when they cleaned it off the walls.

I wonder if they were wearing rubber gloves when they smeared it on the walls.

~

What happened to those fairly recent automobile commercials on television that showed a woman in an evening gown getting out of a big black shiny car in front of a huge house with white pillars in the front? The man driving the car had a handsome streak of gray in his hair. The message was unmistakable: if you want people to think that you're paying a whopping big income tax, you'd better rush out and buy this big black car.

I can't remember the last time I saw an ad like that, can you? Now we see little red cars on TV—the kind of little red car that you always see pulled over to the side of the road. And there's a policeman there by the window writing something on a tablet.

But in the TV ads there's no hint of a policeman—only that breath taking feeling of winding that shiny little red car over crooked country roads at eighty miles an hour. The leaves swirl beneath the wheels. And you know they must have sped up that film because otherwise they'd go off the road. Every time I see those ads I hold my breath and wonder who would be fool enough to drive like that—which is probably why I get no great pleasure out of reading my diary for 1955.

~

A quick look at the court record in the newspaper reveals even more about the world we live in. Out of twenty-two people listed, sixteen of

them were not yet thirty. Only one of the twenty-two was over forty. These twenty-two people were convicted of drug use, drunken driving, assault, theft and forgetfulness. Yes, forgetfulness. The one person over forty whose name was posted in the newspaper with the drunken drivers, thieves, druggies and bullies had forgotten to register his car.

~

When it's town meeting time hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent bangety, bangety, bang, as fast as the moderator can bring his gavel down. And then everything grinds to a halt and there is a heated two hour argument over a $300 item which would buy new weapons for the constables. New weapons? One wonders if the old ones were worn out. Did the barrels burn off, red, hot and smoking?

What is the most dangerous thing these town constables have to do? They'll tell you that it is not shooting it out with desperadoes or fishing out the people who walked on thin ice. The most dangerous situation in Maine law enforcement is stepping between a man and wife who are slugging it out, toe to toe. No matter which one the officer grabs, the other one slugs him.

Anyone from Massachusetts might be puzzled at the things that happen at a Maine town meeting, but there is a simple, reasonable explanation for everything. For example, at our town meeting a man stood up and voted to cut 16 percent from the budget across the board. He moved that there be a secret paper ballot. This took an hour and a half.

While people were standing around they bought all the cookies and soda on the table at the end of the hall. Of course, the guy who made the motion to have the secret ballot owned the concession.

~

Did you see the published list of one hundred or so delinquent dads from this area? They are the men who, for reasons best known to themselves, are behind on their child support payments. My name was not on the list, but not for lack of trying. You know, it isn't until a man is well along in years and reads these lists in the paper that he is glad that he was very homely boy with bad breath when he was in high school.

~

Several years ago a most unpleasant man moved here from Boston. After putting up with his foolishness for two or three years, one of the local boys thought he'd encourage this guy to move back to Boston. So late one night this kid came up behind the man as he got out of his car, stuck a gun in his ribs, and robbed him of three dollars and fourteen cents. The next day that man moved back to Boston.

We were all glad to see him go, but none of us were pleased with the way the kid had gone about it. And the next time I saw him I chewed him out for scaring the man to death. He said, "Scared? You don't know nothing about city people. They aren't afraid of holdup men. When he felt my gun in his ribs, he got just plain homesick."

~

This week the Camden Opera House is featuring a very exciting play called, "Wait Until Dark." I understand that in one scene the police rush out on stage and arrest two drug smugglers. When this play was produced in Machias, the police then rushed down into the audience and arrested three more.

~ Sound, Basic Procedures ~

You'd have to look a long time before you found a place in the world that wasn't famous for something. Right outside every town there is usually a big sign that tells tourists what that wonderful thing is, be it "Maple Syrup Capital of The World," or "Lobster Capital of The World."

Our county is famous for having the largest percentage of fifth grade students who smoke—unfortunately there is no sign out on the road giving us credit.

And our Sheriff has achieved fame for his hard-nosed attitude in dealing with criminals.

I was sitting next to him at a recent awards banquet when the city manager gave him a bronze plaque for his efforts.

"I'm still intimidated when one of your cars with the blue lights follows me," I confessed to him. "I went to school before they taught first graders to chant, 'The sheriff is our friend.'"

The Sheriff smiled at the prime rib on his plate and loosened his wide black belt a notch.

"This award," I jabbered nervously. "I suppose it's for catching a lot of crooks?"

He shook his head. "Actually, most of the crimes I solved this year were committed by my own men."

I licked my lips and hinted, "Pornography? Midnight rendezvous at quiet motels?"

The Sheriff laughed. "I'm afraid you're thinking about preachers. No, my boys wouldn't stoop to anything as low as that. Most of them were suspended for not following sound, basic police procedures in their work."

"Without rules and regulations our society would fall," I observed.

"That's one of the first things an officer learns. Suppose, for example, at 2AM we approach four young men loading their truck with boxes

behind your cousin's grocery store. They're not guilty of stealing anything until it's proven in court. And unless we follow the regulations in presenting our case, the defendant's lawyer will trip us up and we're sure to lose."

"If my cousin caught them in his store you'd be spared a lot of trouble," I said.

The Sheriff slashed at his prime rib and cried, "Don't talk like that. If every store owner blew away his night visitors, within six months there'd be next to no robbers left and I'd have to lay off half my department."

"It is a somewhat uncivilized way of doing things," I agreed.

The Sheriff assumed a confidential air and lowered his voice. "My son works in Saudi Arabia. You talk about being uncivilized. For the first robbery, the crook loses a finger. For the second, they lop off the poor man's hand. For the third, they take off his head."

"Rather basic procedures," I observed. "Probably not much crime there?"

The Sheriff shook his head sadly, "You can leave your luggage on the street for hours day or night and when you come back, it's still there. The barbarians don't need much of a police department and the budget for their prison system is next to nothing."

I stuck out my chest and said, "You want proof of our superiority to other countries, look at our vast modern complex prisons and the difficulty of getting into any of them."

"Only crooks who follow the basic procedures can do it."

"There's an exciting new concept in crime prevention unfolding in Boston this very week," I said.

"Bostonians have always been leaders."

"Last week two men with knives mugged a woman on Marlowe Street. One of her more perceptive neighbors observed that Marlowe Street has been drawing this sort of activity for years. His solution is to make Marlowe into a one way street and thereby shut off the availability of a 'ripe escape route.'"

"How do you remember all that stuff?"

"Easy," I explained. "Every time I hear someone say something foolish I write it down in a book."

The Sheriff nodded with understanding. "Must be a pretty big book."

~ Some TV Commentary ~

I've been watching Heraldo and other men on television lately, hoping to pick up some tips on how to make my TV show better—more professional for your edification and enjoyment. After all, there is no reason that they should be able to make a television show in New York that is more interesting than the ones we make here in Maine.

And I have noticed that Heraldo, and many other men who make their shows in New York, have long hair. What I can't understand is why Heraldo looks like he has long hair when he has long hair. And why, when I have long hair, I look like I need a haircut.

~

So you've moved up to Maine to retire and have discovered that it is difficult for poor old retired people from away to get a fair shake here. Your taxes are certainly higher than they should be and the natives take advantage of you as you suffer along on a fixed income.

Cheer up. I can sympathize. Newcomers have felt uncomfortable here since my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, Moses Robinson, moved to Thomaston in 1734.

So remember that you are not the first newcomer to freeze to death beside the Atlantic Ocean, surrounded by hostile strangers who don't even try to understand your problem.

You are breaking new ground, however, when you complain that your taxes are $2.37 higher than they should be on your $750,000 house.

~

No matter what you have heard on television about how big and roomy the new pickup trucks are, pickup trucks are getting smaller and smaller. One of my friends has one of these so-called big, new American pickup trucks with a snowplow on the front, so I know what I'm talking about.

When I was in high school in 1951 I was driving the same white 1919 Model T pickup truck that you see me driving every summer. And I can distinctly remember that Roy Swanson and I could sit on either end of that seat, in complete comfort, and right there on that seat between us, there was still plenty of space for Mary Anne Pellicani and Carol Hawkins. If we scrunched up a little bit, and I've got to admit that then it would be crowded, we could make room for John Lantz and Patty Benner.

You hear what I'm telling you about these big new pickup trucks. Last week my wife and I spent a leisurely evening visiting friends. When it came time to go home it was snowing wicked and the snow had piled up outside. And my friend said, "There's no way you can get home in this. I'll take you down in the big truck."

So he jumped in behind the wheel. And his wife slid in beside him, and my wife slid in beside her. And you know, I had to ride home in the back of the truck.

~

I received a letter on last week's show where we talked about "quality time." Rich Roth says, "Every time I hear someone say 'quality time' I get this urge to scrape off the bottom of my shoes."

Thank you Rich. I get the same feeling every time I hear someone use the word "share" when they mean "tell," as in "I have something here I'd like to 'share' with you today." These people give you the impression that they have a box of unwanted chocolate chip cookies. One can only suspect that this kind of double talk is moving in from California.

~

Last Saturday I entertained at a trade show in Manchester, New Hampshire, and got to spend a whole day visiting the booths. I saw some preserves that had a "No Preservatives" label on them, and asked the girl how you could preserve without preserving.

She said, "I cold pack."

And I said, "That's interesting. I have some rhubarb in my cellar that Aunt Ami cold packed for me in 1970. But I wouldn't eat it after twenty-six years, would you?"

And she said, "Well, I drink wine."

~

Did you read in the paper that anyone who kills more than 10,000 rats in Bangladesh gets a free color TV? It's my understanding that in some of those far away mysterious countries people don't even believe in killing

flies or mosquitoes. So it's good to learn that, elsewhere in the world, people are becoming actively involved in an anti-rat program.

Think what would happen here in Maine if you could get a free TV for turning in 10,000 rat skins. I can see some enterprising people raising them in one of DeCosta's abandoned hen houses, can't you?

~

I stopped in to Moody's Diner about 2AM last week on my way home from that trip to New Hampshire, and in the booth right behind me were a couple of high school kids who were giggling and fooling around like high school kids do. And even though I'm deafer than a post I couldn't help but hear the girl say, "Didn't your father ever tell you about girls?" And the boy said, "No, but a lot of girls told me about my father."

I couldn't help but wonder what brought them way down here from Camden.

~

Do you remember the old auto registration office on Main Street in Rockland? If you were fifteen or sixteen years old back in the 1950s, getting your car registered there was a contract job. My brother Jim struggled with the system for years. No matter what he'd bring in there for documentation, the woman behind the desk would find something wrong with it. She'd always hand it back to him and smugly say, "You need your father's signature." Or, "Do you have solid rubber tires or pneumatic? Fill it out completely and bring it back." Maine took a great step forward when they eliminated that "Do you have solid rubber tires or pneumatic" question on automobile registration forms.

To get back to my brother Jim, I can understand the struggle he had with that woman because I was scared of her, too. When you're sixteen years old you want to get that car registered right that minute, and it seemed like an eternity when you had to hitchhike home, knowing that it would be one more day before you'd get your car on the road.

Like all the rest of us, Jim dreaded his annual struggle with that woman. But one day his papers were in order. He knew everything was perfect. For the first time since he was fifteen years old he was going to get the best of that woman at the automobile registration office.

He was young, so it's not unkind to say that he walked in there with a wicked chip on his shoulder. The woman read every word on his application. There was nothing wrong with it. She looked up, smiled, and said, "How's your mother?"

~

A young man was eating breakfast at my house last week as I was putting on a friendly old red coat—getting ready to run a cord of fir through my

wood splitter. I turned to The Almost Perfect Woman and said, "This won't take long. Eric is going to help me."

I was trying to be funny, because if you know anything about the young men who follow your daughters home from college, you know that they are about as useful as snowshoes on a lobster boat. Yes, they might be studying engineering at MIT on full fellowships. Yes, next year when they graduate their starting salaries will be more than you earn after thirty years of teaching, but their idea of being useful is to destroy your home life by buying your daughter a fish, complete with leaking tank—or a dog. And you know who ends up taking care of that.

So I was surprised when this young fellow followed me. I looked at him with disbelief over my wood splitter and said, "Are you going to help me and thereby destroy the stereotype of the worthless boyfriend?"

This was indeed his intent.

But he was wearing a brand, spanking new blue jacket with an attached hood that you can draw together with a string, so you can look like a fourteenth century monk in an Ingemar Bergman movie. If you've got kids you know that they simply don't care what they do to their clothes, and you can imagine what that jacket would look like after handling a cord of ant-infested fir. So I told him I was glad that he was going to help me, but he was going to have to change—I couldn't stand to see anyone destroy a brand new jacket. And he said, "Oh, it's not mine—your wife says she's been trying to get you to wear it for two years."

~

Last week I was looking out of a window in my barn, when a young man with a clipboard in his hand got out of his car and walked around to the front of my house. I naturally figured he was there to read the meter, because everybody in the world knows that in Maine we pack our front doors with insulation and nail them shut. Sometimes they don't get opened for fifty or sixty years. So I knew for sure he wasn't looking for me.

Of course, in the summer it's not unusual for someone who listens to me on Public Radio to look me up, but they usually drive new Saabs, BMWs, or Volvos. And this fellow was in one of those older, nondescript American station wagons that you can buy at a Camden estate auction for $600.

But when he came around the side of the house and saw me, a look of relief came over his face. He hurried toward me and said, "I'm looking for Mrs. Snow. She lives in a yellow house with an unattached barn."

I said, "You go up ten or twelve houses and you'll find her."

And here I pause to mention that there is only one strip of hot top in my part of St. George. You can go down it, to Port Clyde, or up it to Thomaston.

He turned, moved toward his car, pointed down the road and said, "I go that way ten or twelve houses?"

I said, "You go up. Which way is north?"

He squinted in the bright sunlight and said, "I don't know."

I said, "There's the sun so north must be up that way."

The most famous Swedish war hero was named Sven Duva.

When his captain said to retreat, Sven ran the wrong way and routed the enemy. America's potential for similar heroes is staggering.

~

If you are in business, you might have clever little answers for those predictable questions your customers ask four or five times a week. Nobody knows that you've said it a thousand times and it gives people the impression that you can think pretty fast on your feet. Here's an example. When a local antique dealer is asked if he buys antiques, he always says, "Gosh, I've got to. I can't steal enough to stay in business."

~

Did you hear about the woman who said that robbers had locked her in her car trunk? It gave her an excuse for not coming to work for the previous three days. Police became suspicious when they looked in the trunk, because there were no signs that anyone had lived there for three days.

Anyone who knows what bears do in the woods would have become suspicious. If a bear or a fox or anything else lives in your woods for three days, you ***will*** see signs.

Why didn't that woman realize that if a person lives in the trunk of a car for three days, there should be signs? I think it's because she'd watched too many soap operas. On soap operas, they can tie a woman to a chair for a week, and if you give her an occasional drink of water and a scrap of food, she gets along fine.

~

You heard about the man in the county jail who gained eighty pounds since Christmas time. The newspaper and television people have had quite a time with it. But what you probably haven't heard, is that the warden of that jail has been offered a job in Washington DC as Executive Director of the National Association of Pork Producers.

~

Six men were recently arrested in a Lubec burglary case. In the same paper we read that six men were arrested for crimes in the Rockland area. What has happened to the rugged individualism that we used to boast of here in Maine? Are bookkeepers the only ones left with the courage to go out and steal on their own?

~

I've gotten into the habit of reading Dutch newspapers on the Internet because things happen in Holland that would make our local reporter eat his heart out. Here's a sample item: "Three bludgeons, sixteen knives, twelve steel and wooden clubs, eight screwdrivers, garrotes, brass knuckles, eight cans of teargas and an ax. That was what Zaandam county police netted in a raid last week in a disco named, *The Fun Factory.*"

~

When I went into the Maine State Automobile Registration office to get a paper for a friend, the large crowd of people waiting there surprised me. There was a sign that said, "Take a number." Some days you can wait for the better part of an hour before they get around to you.

This is a result of downsizing. You've heard about it. Downsizing means getting rid of useless bureaucrats to save the taxpayers money. Most people feel good when they hear about downsizing. But now we are downsized to the extent that when you call Augusta to try to find out about something, you get an answering machine, which refers you to yet another answering machine. So it is now virtually impossible to find out about anything, and when we go in to register a car we take a number and wait.

Perhaps you're not old enough to remember when it was fashionable to laugh at the long waiting lines they had in Russia. We always saw pictures of the lines, and underneath it would say, "This is what it's like to live under Communism."

The next time you have to stand and wait, remember that it is downsizing that has advanced our country to the kind of lines that the Russians were complaining about twenty years ago.

~

The almost perfect woman and I went down to Boston to watch Alison, her oldest, run the Boston Marathon. We left a day early so as to be sure to get a parking place. But Alison didn't know we were coming a day early, so she wasn't at the Boston apartment where we stay. We sat in the truck for six or so hours and finally drove forty miles until we found a motel. The man behind the desk said, "Smoking or no smoking?" And

here I should mention if you've never been in a smoking room, you should know that there is a difference.

I said, "No smoking."

He said, "We have only one room left, it is a smoking room, and because of the Boston Marathon it is probably the only available room left in Massachusetts." So we took it.

Every dark and smoky cloud has a silver lining, and this room was no exception, because the next morning when we woke up, my wife rolled over on her pillow, smiled in my face and, for the first time since we got married, said, "Your breath is the sweetest smelling thing in this room."

We then drove down to the Marathon. Nothing happens for the first couple of hours, but it gets quite exciting when the first runner comes in. He's wearing white pants and he's got the longest, skinniest arms and legs you've ever seen. People scream and holler and jump up and down.

And then you wait two more hours. And at last here comes Alison and you jump up and down and scream, "Alison, Alison," and other people start screaming, "Alison, Alison," and she does that Boston Marathon in four hours.

Of course the best part is the next day when you get back to Maine. Imagine being able to brag to all your friends and neighbors, that your wife's kid can run twice as long as that skinny guy with the white pants.

~ Ghosts of Christmas Past ~

Have you ever seen a Christmas ghost? Have you ever met anyone who has? While visiting an elderly neighbor in a nursing home not too far from here, I was sitting in a chair near the door when a couple of nurses out in the hall started talking about ghosts. When one of them said that psychic phenomena can explain many things, I really started to pay attention. You know, you wonder if people who see ghosts are capable of taking care of our old friends and neighbors. She said she'd run into this psychic phenomena on her first job out of nursing school. She said, "We had a ward of twelve elderly ladies. They were all very sweet, and after the tough old birds I'd worked with at school, the job looked like a snap."

Then, early one morning, one of them whispered to me, "'My husband was here last night.'" Well, you know how they tell you at school that we should not humor elderly people when they hallucinate. I told her that her husband was not with us anymore.

But she just smiled at me, a real warm smile, and said, "'My husband was here last night.'"

I told the head nurse about it and she said it was one of the most common things you hear in nursing homes. Some old people are always being visited by a parent or a loved one who hasn't drawn a breath for twenty or thirty years.

So I didn't think anything about it when the woman in the next bed tuned in with the same thing about a week later. And with two of them saying it, none of us was surprised when 'My husband was here last night' was the only thing we heard in the entire ward from breakfast until noon. Even two ladies who had never been married picked it up.

Appetites improved right down the line. The doctor said it wasn't unusual for people to eat more when they were in good spirits. And although he reminded us that we had an obligation to keep the patients in touch with reality, their imaginations had really done them a lot of good. Ladies who had been tired and had long been content to gaze at the ceiling for hours took a new interest in reading and knitting. Some began

to write letters to friends and relatives. They visited with other patients and grew stronger from walking about and eating so well. The minister who visited the patients every day said we were witnessing a Christmas miracle and preached a special sermon on it the following Sunday. No one thought of it as being spooky at the time because everyone was so content and happy. The shock came on Christmas morning: I noticed that not one of the patients had finished her breakfast. When the other nurse in my ward mentioned that not one of them had said, 'My husband was here last night,' the hair stood right up on the back of my neck.

You talk about your psychic phenomena. No one on the entire hospital staff was ever able to explain it and I guess I asked all of them about it.

All except our old night watchman, that is. The batteries in his pacemaker had melted down on Christmas Eve and he'd spent the night over in intensive care."

~ Modern Senior Citizens ~

To my way of thinking my next-door neighbor Gramp Wiley is a model senior citizen. He has perfected the art of making regal observations and pronouncements from his rocking chair. He wears two sweaters and a coat on the warmest days. He can sleep in any position for eighteen hours out of the twenty-four. Gramp spoils his great-grandchildren rotten. For years I pointed him out as a typical great-grandfather.

But last month I worked at a hotel that bussed in hundreds of vacationers in Gramp's age group. My job was to stand before these kindly old folks right after the evening meal, tell a few dry stories as they sat nodding, and thereby give them something to chuckle about on the trip home.

"What can I tell these old folks that they don't already know?" I asked Alice, the tour leader. "I don't want to offend anyone and the only guidelines the management gave me was to steer a course somewhere between The Playboy Club and Sesame Street. I've never had an audience like this before. I don't know what to do."

Alice said, "Nothing you could say would shock, surprise or educate them. These people have been everywhere and they've done everything. Most of them have lived lives that would get censored on an afternoon soap."

"What kinds of things interest old folks?" I asked.

"To put the ladies in heaven you take them to a warehouse where there's a sale and turn them loose. Five hours later the bus driver will be leaning on his horn because half of them will be inside, pretending they don't know it's time to leave. The men? One ninety year old lives with his girlfriend, but that doesn't keep him from trying to put the move on me. He's only got two fingers on his right hand, but how the old coot can pinch. How he does it with fingers missing is something I don't know."

I said, "Pinching is childish."

"Today's senior citizens are nothing more than recycled teenagers," Alice cried. "They didn't have a chance to howl when they were kids so now they're having a second whack at it. Going with them is like being swept away in an American Legion convention; only they go to bed a little earlier.

"Money isn't a problem to most of the folks you'll see bussed into this hotel on tours. Some of them have assets up to the armpits, but they'll only spend the interest—God forbid they should touch the principal. I'm still trying to figure out what they're going to do with the principal. They're eighty-five or ninety and they'll tell you that they're saving it for a rainy day—they're saving it for a rainy day and it's pouring.

"Wine, you know, is not drinking to most of them," she continued. "It's gracious living. On the bus they all have a little carry-on bag. Toothbrushes? Snacks?" Alice laughed. "Those bags are full of uppers, downers and three vials apiece of medication—plus little nip bottles of booze. If the police ever found a bus full of teenagers with that much booze and drugs aboard, NBC and CBS would film documentaries on it. The whole world would be shocked to learn that anything like it, short of a rock band, rolled on our highways."

Alice took a deep breath. "I pray every day that I can get up enough energy to keep up with these eighty-year-old ladies. You don't know! A month ago we took a vote on entertainment for the evening. They voted, unanimously, to visit the Golden Banana, a male strip joint. One of them carried a brown paper bag with a nightie in it. She said that if she had a chance to run off with an entertainer she wasn't going to miss out this time."

"No," said Alice, "you've got a good audience here and you don't need to worry about what you say to them. They've been everywhere and back. When we pulled in here this afternoon the manager of the hotel came out and apologized that one wing of the place was still under construction. 'We still have a few plumbers and electricians left,' he said. One of the little old ladies pushed her way out of my group and said, 'I'll take a plumber.'"

~ Maine Summer Camp ~

There are still a few hippies with us. Remember their golden age back in the 1960s? Ashamed of juicy trust funds and Ivy League educations, they rejected it all (temporarily) to live on granola in tightly insulated, wood heated cabins with no plumbing. Now, half-forgotten vestiges of a past era, they (and their limping golden retrievers with the red bandannas) are rapidly falling into middle-age decay—very much like hundreds of useless, crumbling Egyptian tanks on the Sinai.

True, the weaker ones unobtrusively slid into responsible positions in the community. Inheriting the genes that had pulled their forebearers to the top of the pile in the first place; it was inevitable. Without really knowing how it happened, they started ad agencies or found themselves teaching at universities.

But the hard-core handful of hippies who are still passing themselves off as "carpenters" or "writers"—those who don't plan to dip into their trust funds until they're in nursing homes—now drive rusty Volvos to an annual three-day national meeting. It's usually held deep within a secluded sylvan glen, where they can quietly take off all their clothes, smoke dope, and pig out on lentils and bean sprouts.

For years Greensleeves dressed in overalls and ran with the local hippy pack just so everyone would think his parents were rich. So I was somewhat surprised when he told me he missed their recent annual conclave—held this year in Texas.

"Getting too old to sleep in a tent with tarantulas and scorpions?" I hinted.

My friend looked like I'd offered him a crisp slice of bacon. "Nothing like that. I'm working at a summer camp for rich teen-aged kids. There's biking and hiking and swimming and sailing plus arts and crafts. We wear them down during the day so they'll sleep at night."

"You've put on weight."

"It's that kind of camp. There are other camps where kids cook their own food—potatoes wrapped in tinfoil buried in the ashes of a campfire. The outsides are burned to a crisp and the insides are white mush."

"Their parents received a brochure advertising self-respect through a feeling of accomplishment," I exclaimed.

"We've got a cook who makes the kind of bread most people taste only once in a lifetime. His shish kebab is perfection—so the meat eaters say," he added apologetically.

"You've finally found a comfortable berth."

"Not really. As the chief administrator I have to be on my toes. The number one challenge at a camp for teenagers is making sure that after lights-out the boys are all in their cabins, way down on the lake, and the girls are all in theirs, up on the hill."

"I'd rather put toothpaste back in a tube or clear a field of dandelions. How do you do it?"

"Guards. Of course during the day we call them counselors—recruited from colleges all over the world. One sleeps, like Cerberus, by the door of every cabin."

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," I cried.

Greensleeves said, "True, kids don't get out at night, but one or two usually manage to get lost on trips to the city. Last year two girls wandered away from our group in Quebec. It took a good deal of concentrated effort, but they did it. Imagine the pleasure they got when they called their mothers in New York City and told them they were lost. Before we'd even missed the girls, their mothers had called the camp and signed them up for the next season."

"The first time my parents took me to Boston, I knew enough to leave a trail of bread crumbs."

"Football ranks number two as our contact sport. We try to explain it to city boys by comparing the boy with the ball to a little old lady with a pocketbook."

"What's number one?" I foolishly asked.

"Ah, how long has it been since you were fourteen? Although we constantly preach against it, we see a terrible amount of hand holding and hugging in the crowded line at mealtime. Even the counselors—who usually pair off the first week—are guilty."

"I can understand that. Nothing excites me more than a woman who shows up here at mealtime lugging a gallon of hot lobster Newburg and a basket of homemade yeast biscuits."

"Perhaps you've forgotten that teen-age conversations can be intense. Last week one of the younger boys was sitting on a picnic table, talking

with one of the girls. Well, they started wrestling and the boy had the girl pretty well pinned, when one of the counselors tapped him on the shoulder and asked him what he thought he was doing. The kid looked up and said, 'I was asking her if she really did know how to play the trumpet.'"

~ Organizing Belfast Schools ~

Last week I picked up an interesting brochure in the Falmouth, Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce office. "They Need Housing," it said. Below the headline were pictures of people in low-income groups who are presently unable to buy houses.

When I dropped it on Gramp Wiley's kitchen table he looked at the pictures of the gas pump jockeys, the check out clerks, the schoolteachers and the nurses.

Then he surprised me by burying his face in his hands for almost a whole minute. When he gained control of himself he looked up and, in a voice somewhat choked with emotion, said, "I had no idea that the salaries of check out clerks and my friends who pump my gas at the station had dropped down to the level of school teachers."

"You don't feel bad for the poor teachers?"

Gramp Wiley snorted, "Perhaps the old ones, but not the young ones who are just starting out. You want to remember that thirty years ago, teachers were well to do members of the community. They could buy a house with a year's salary. They all had new cars. They all had work in the winter. Their kids could go to a state teachers' college where the tuition was fifty bucks a semester. You couldn't blame them for getting into a profession where they could make a good living."

"What happened?"

"I don't really know. All of a sudden it took more than what a teacher could earn in four years to buy a house. Of course, the older teachers already had houses so they held their own, so to speak, when the value of their property went up. But the younger ones could just forget about it."

"But you don't feel bad for the kids?"

"Why should I? Nowadays rich kids are about the only ones who consider a career in teaching."

"To punish their parents by flaunting downward mobility," I cried to show Gramp I'd remembered one of his old lessons.

"Then, to make things even tougher on themselves, they get a Master's Degree in reading or some other specialized area—they become experts."

I lowered my eyes. "The kiss of death."

"Right. Nothing makes it more difficult to get a job teaching than having a Master's Degree—unless it's being elected Teacher of The Year. You have to pay qualified teachers more money. The young teachers know it when they set themselves up to fail by picking up that extra degree. So I can't feel bad for them when they invite trouble with wide open eyes."

"So it doesn't matter if teachers can buy a home with their salaries or not. According to you, most of them are rich kids—they can enjoy wallowing around in poverty all they want, knowing that a juicy trust fund is there when they need it."

Gramp Wiley squirmed in his rocking chair and cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "There might be a few poor ones in there." Then he pounded the arm of his rocker and shouted, "But they went into teaching knowing that they could make more money by simply putting up stock on supermarket shelves."

I nodded and said, "If they'd wanted in on the big money, they could have become school supervisors."

Gramp said, "You heard me tell about the expert school supervisor they sent to Belfast a while back? No? Well, someone felt that the Belfast schools were in need of reorganization so one of those expert-coordinating supervisors was brought in. He got $220 a day plus his mileage between schools, but they figured he'd be a bargain at any price because he was going to show them how to tighten up the rigging and run a taut ship in general."

"His first day out on the road he breezed into a school, told the secretary who he was and checked out the entire office—pulled out all the files and scribbled extensive notes on improvements to be made. Then he trotted down to the janitor's niche and made a few suggestions to him."

"School janitors always like to be told what to do," I said eagerly.

Gramp ignored me and continued. "He checked the hot lunch menus and the cook's fingernails. He sniffed at the milk cartons and sampled the American chop suey."

"A staple in American schools," I cried. "It's cheap and wholesome."

"In the afternoon he watched the teachers until he couldn't keep still any longer—you know how educators need to stand and talk. He jumped to his feet in Mrs. Maxy's classroom and asked if he could tell the children what he was doing and how he was going to show the teachers and janitors and cooks in the entire Belfast school system how to do their jobs much more efficiently. And Mrs. Maxy smiled just as pleasantly as could be and said, 'There must be some mistake—you're in Warren.'"

~ The Almost Perfect Woman ~

The most blatant lie in any book is the statement in the preface that you are reading a work of fiction. It is perhaps impossible to write fiction and authors only throw in the "this is fiction" bit to keep from being sued. Here is the first newspaper column I wrote about my wife Marsha. It is not fiction. I had lived alone for twenty years when she came into my home and seized control. Here is an unvarnished description of the clutter that quietly inundated one Maine hermit and what one Type A woman did about it.

~

Have you noticed how your favorite old bachelor friend's place has run down since the last time you were there—even though the last time you were there you thought to yourself that it couldn't possibly get any worse?

For years my friend Greensleeves typified the middle-aged man who has lived alone too long: Untrimmed grass leading up to the side door. Unpainted steps on a sagging porch. Handy equipment—axe, shovel, bucket of sand for winter ice, burlap bag bulging with a set of tire chains, unused broom, coat and hat on nail, hammer, saw, three or four bricks, innumerable small and unidentifiable, but extremely valuable items—in the entry. Antique wallpaper in the kitchen covered with soot and cobwebs. Thick coating of dust on everything, except a certain area on the kitchen table, which shows signs of recent use. On the table bright blue fired in 1947 Mexican plate—leaking lead—containing two pork chop bones from the last meal. Two A&P sugared donuts—hard as hockey pucks in a box with a cellophane window. Can of Carnation milk, with two holes punched in the top by a nail. Assorted screws, nails and several quite dead electrical switches from junked 1974 Plymouth.

Mounds that might be kitchen chairs filled with items of clothing and stacks of unread junk mail, some secured by rubber bands. Sofa partially covered with gamey blanket so the dog won't cut its feet on protruding

springs. Cardboard boxes filled with important papers. Calendar last turned in July—1971.

One very thin towel hung on wooden rack in bathroom. Tub with four legs. Bottom of each leg shaped like claw clutching ball. Mold on walls and ceiling from years of steamy baths. One unopened bottle of Old Spice shaving lotion on shelf—Christmas gift in 1963 from schoolteacher friend who received twenty-nine bottles of Old Spice as Christmas gifts in 1954. Rusty tin medicine cabinet with mirror. Several toilet paper roll cardboard centers under wash basin. Pan also under basin to catch drip.

Rinsed plastic milk containers around black iron kitchen sink. Twelve years' worth of washed out small jars, still defended as destined for the workshop as valuable containers for rusty nails. Linoleum worn black on counter completely missing behind the dripping faucets. Cupboard shelves covered with newspapers dated January 1, 1974—mementos of the last half-hearted pick-up, clean up. Several dozen quarts of rhubarb cold-packed by Aunt Ami in 1971. A can of scouring powder with a Dutch girl brandishing a stick on it—a message on the back from Uncle Sam reminds one that saving the metal ends will help defeat the Axis.

Thick crop of dust balls on all floors, except for paths between strategic areas—bed, bathroom, kitchen table. Brown cloth curtains that would crack if folded.

Grim? Most women might find it so. But a middle age man doesn't notice it. His home is a fact of life. He has not created his immediate surroundings—it has simply grown around him as he has gone about his everyday affairs.

In such a manner Greensleeves lived happily for years. Then, two months ago he met the almost perfect woman. Things started to change.

She was smart. Little by little, she vacuumed up the dust, easing him into the new order, as it were. A week later every dish was washed and replaced in scrubbed cupboards on store-bought shelf paper.

As soon as my friend adjusted to that, she got down on her hands and knees and scrubbed all the floors in the house. In the meantime, she had convinced him to sort through overflowing cardboard boxes that had commandeered his entire house for years. Greensleeves made more trips to the dump that month than he had over the past fifteen years.

Sensing that he was delighted with her need for order, she shifted her maneuvers onto fresh ground. After sweeping out his cellar she hosed down the walls and scrubbed the floor.

While resting each day, she did his wash and prepared tasty, nourishing meals.

I know for a fact that Greensleeves almost cried for joy when his friend scraped and painted his house and glazed all the windows, which

most any Maine woman could have done—but not while weeding two acres of vegetables.

When she butchered his two pigs and packed them in the freezer, we all figured our old bachelor buddy was a goner.

But he isn't seeing her anymore. When I asked him why, he said he was ashamed to be seen in public with a woman who always had such raw, chapped hands.

~ The Cat Couldn't Appeal ~

When I told little Bobby he didn't need to mow my lawn again I thought that was the end of it.

But the following Tuesday morning I read in the newspaper that he had filed a notice of intent to appeal his firing. A letter from Bobby requesting the appeal was received by my attorney the same afternoon.

I immediately took my case to the highest court. Gramp Wiley pretended he'd been sleeping in his rocker when I entered his trailer, but the corner of a Playboy magazine stuck out from behind one of the cushions.

"Bobby's taking me to court for firing him," I said matter of factly.

My old neighbor nodded knowingly. "I saw it coming. Even an eighth grade kid who has mowed your lawn all summer knows that he can make your life miserable when you fire him. It's 'newthink,' and in 1988 he's got public opinion behind him. The boss isn't the boss anymore. Workers have recently sprouted some kind of mysterious 'rights' that have made it very difficult for many of them to get jobs—the boss knows that once they are hired, even if they aren't able to fit in with his organization, it's almost impossible to get rid of them."

"What's going to happen?" I asked.

"Whatever happens, it's going to make front page news in the local paper," Gramp said solemnly, "so be prepared for that. To begin with, the process leading up to the appeal could take as long as two months, so things will be relatively quiet until then. When the reporters call you, it's best not to make any comments about Bobby's dismissal. Say that you know everyone in town has a right to know why you fired him, but that Bobby's rights would be compromised. I know you gave him a warning in July the third time he ran the mower over your garden hose, but you should decline to state your reasons for the action pending the hearing."

"What will the neighbors say?"

"Half of them will support Bobby and say that because he got off to a bad start he deserves a second chance. The other half will claim he's too

overqualified to mow lawns and should be working on his junior lifesaving badge out at the lake. Because you're the boss, many of them will spread unpleasant rumors about you."

"But it's my lawn. You'd think I could hire or fire anyone I wanted."

Gramp Wiley laughed. "Not nowadays. Bobby's going to claim that his dismissal creates an unwarranted blemish on his otherwise perfect record. If he's a typical firee, he'll dig up every bit of dirt he can on you and circulate it among his friends."

I had to smile. "You live within one hundred feet of me and you know there is no dirt on me."

"Oh, doesn't he know that three women stayed over during the weekend of your lobster picnic? And wasn't he mowing the lawn last year when Alberta threw Marjory's suitcase out through an upstairs window?"

"Every word of that is hearsay, and is inadmissible as evidence in court. And what happened wasn't really as interesting as it sounds when you tell about it."

Gramp said, "Oh, those innumerable, harmless little incidents, that seem to clutter the life of any normal middle aged man, sound altogether different when they're repeated on the witness stand and reported in the newspaper. If the press even hints that you're a womanizer,—and here Gramp smiled at the absurdity of such a thought—there'll be such a crowd of women standing in line to get into your place, you'll have to move to Florida.

I didn't like what Gramp said, but I knew it was true. Long ago he'd proven to me that nothing makes a young man more attractive to a young woman than having her parents point out the fact that he's completely worthless. And nothing makes an older man more attractive to middle-aged women than a hint that he's notorious and perhaps just a little bit dangerous.

My neighbor leaned closer and assumed a confidential air. "Just what broke the camel's back? Bobby can mow as good as any kid his age. How'd you happen to let him go?"

Pursing my lips, I said, "I asked him to give my sick calf a cup of castor oil. He thought I said 'cat' instead of 'calf.'"

"What happened?"

"Well, as of today that cat's got four other cats working for him—one digging, one burying, and two looking for fresh ground."

~ He Who Laughs, Lasts ~

There are some things you can print in newspapers and there are some things you can't print in newspapers. Some words and topics, which were in perfectly good taste in 1943, would generate howls of rage and disgust should they appear in newspapers today. Conversely, no one needs to be told that lurid words and stories are now welcome in little "family newspapers" simply because people have the right to know the truth. If you don't think those juicy little true items sell newspapers, ask why they are splashed on the front page. Consider that the paper could just as easily fulfill its "journal of record" obligation by weaving such sensational items in with the classified ads. I can think of no advertiser who would object.

Yes, interesting stories that my Victorian great-grandmother could have told at a church supper now have to be tossed aside for fear of offending a modern, enlightened, well-rounded person today.

Anyone who thinks that Americans enjoy freedom of the press has never had to sit down and write a newspaper column about people.

Before even turning on a word processor, social commentators must first carefully determine which words and groups are safe today—are Swedes still calling themselves Swedes? When a Swede flunks a fire department employment examination does a court-ordered affirmative action plan force the department to throw out the test and hire him?

Perhaps that's why so many columns are written about bureaucrats. Even stoop shouldered people who have worn heel holes in their Masonite desktops would deny being bureaucrats. Say anything you want about a bureaucrat and nobody will complain because you're talking about someone else.

Local politicians are fair game for the same reason: Here he is, now a selectman, oozing power and importance as he jumps to his feet at town meetings. The notes in his hand, hastily garnered from unemployed advisors at the local coffee shop, lend credence to solemn, wordy evaluations of sewer and landfill problems. Although seldom contributing anything of value in private board councils, a reporter in the room tends to loosen his

jaw and one would think by reading newspaper accounts that he was the only person there.

Although everybody in the world who has ever gone to a meeting has had to listen to a clone of that guy, not one of the little power-grabbing gasbags in a million is clever enough to recognize himself when so described.

Then there are lawyers. This week I received, in an unsolicited package from California, a book of common jokes about lawyers and a cartoon book, *100 Uses For A Dead Lawyer*. Obviously, anything goes with lawyers.

Student as I am of the present collective mind, I found the book to be an instructive study. All of the dead lawyers being tastefully dumped from the back of a truck were white. Look at the models in any magazine ad today and see how often that happens. Only one dead lawyer was a woman. Ditto.

So anything goes with lawyers only as long as they are white and male.

The jokes in the book were as advertised—those we've heard our lawyer friends tell on themselves for years. Examples: How can you tell if a lawyer is lying? His lips are moving. And, what do you need when you have three lawyers up to their necks in concrete? More concrete. Why does Nevada have more lawyers and New Hampshire more toxic waste dumps? New Hampshire had first choice. What do you call 2,000 lawyers chained to the bottom of the sea? A good start.

Then there's the one about the lawyer on his way to Hades who sees a recently departed colleague making love to a beautiful woman. "Why," he cries, "must I burn for eternity while that lawyer gets to spend it with that beautiful woman?" The escort jabs him with a pitchfork and snarls, "Who are you to question that woman's punishment?"

For years lawyers have been fair game for journalists with hate in their hearts. This is probably because lawyers make more money than writers. In my humble opinion, being able to write anything you want about lawyers is not adequate compensation.

~ Gramp Wiley Has Most of the Answers ~

Some people question the validity of standardized tests. "Suppose," they say, "the person taking the test is more intelligent than the person who made the test and is, therefore, able to justify a better answer than the one the test maker deems to be correct?"

In conversation, unique answers that would get you marked wrong on a standardized test can earn you the deserved respect from friends who appreciate intelligence and wit.

The humor in my stories often comes from visits with perceptive friends like Julian Rubenstein or Richard Warner who see the world in a logical but off-the-wall manner. Here's an example.

~

Gramp Wiley has a simple, logical answer for almost everything. Although I couldn't think of them myself, his answers are usually obvious and reasonable after I've heard them.

For example, a recent newspaper headline stated, "Davy Crockett Ancestor Dies." Now your average citizen would certainly find that somewhat entertaining, but Gramp Wiley didn't even look up when I read it to him. "Don't you get it?" I asked. And then I repeated, with stress, "'Davy Crockett Ancestor Dies.'"

Gramp shrugged his shoulders and said, "What was the date on the newspaper?"

Then there was a clipping from the court record of a California newspaper that listed at least three dozen petty crimes allegedly committed by one young man.

I showed the article to Gramp and said, "This will earn him the coveted Bonny and Clyde Award from The Association for the Perpetuation of Perpetrators. Do you suppose he was drunk?"

My old neighbor looked at the list, shook his head and said, "No, before he'd have time to do all this he would have died from liver failure."

No problem or situation can be mentioned but what it reminds Gramp of something even worse that happened to him.

When we recently read of a family pet—a cuddly dog—that attacked and killed the owner's five-year-old grandchild, Gramp said, "Dog owners only see what they want to see. When I was a kid my neighbor's dog bit everyone in town. She said she couldn't believe such a thing, as he was such a nice dog. Besides, she'd never seen him bite anybody. After my cousin had five stitches taken, I carried eighteen inches of rake handle under my shirt whenever I walked by there."

"One day that dog cleaned out a screen door and came for me. I'd no sooner pulled out the rake handle when she appeared on the porch and said, 'Young man, I can see you're not a dog lover.'"

Gramp can't even read the comics without advancing a radical social theory. "Someone should sue the people responsible for Dagwood," he once said. "The strip is demeaning to men. We should demand retribution. What kind of a father figure is Dagwood? Even his dog doesn't respect him. Anyone following his adventures gets the impression that an American male spends half his life on the couch and the other half in the bathtub. When he does get to work he sleeps. Dagwood has never taken a bath without Elmo coming in with his big shaggy dog to sail a boat—unless the bathroom is already crowded with half a dozen of Blondie's friends."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'd never thought of it that way. A comic strip really couldn't be any more demeaning to men."

"Oh yes it could," Gramp cried. "Next year Blondie's friends will pull the plug and bring in quoits."

A while back a mountain man, probably a trapper, escaped from prison while doing time for killing a couple of game wardens. "He's gone back to the mountains," Gramp crowed. "He's living off the land—deep fried bobcat livers over a campfire snuggled in beside a hidden primeval lake—fresh fiddleheads, wrapped in moist leaves and steamed between hot rocks."

I couldn't bring myself to tell Gramp that the cops caught the mountain man coming out of a southern Californian convenience store lugging a six-pack of Pepsi and two Twinkies.

~ Rants ~

My friend Dieter told me that his father survived nine years in a prison camp in Siberia. I know that you have read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and probably other accounts of prison life, so even if you have been personally spared this particular type of cultural enrichment, you know what was going on in Russian prison camps fifty years ago. You have to be incredibly tough to survive nine years in most anybody's prison camp, but can you think of anything that would take more out of you than a prison camp in Siberia? Years later they put the old man in a nursing home in Maine and he died the next day.

~

You might very correctly say that there is no validity in presenting a case by analogy, but there are times when an analogy might help explain a given situation. As someone who has spoken to hundreds of audiences, I sometimes compare entertaining an audience to a boxing match. Boxers and professional speakers both have the skills to give you a great performance. But the boxer doesn't know which punches he will throw until he is actually engaged in the ring. He has to see how things are going. The boxer and the speaker might hold back a bit at first and save his best for the final round, where other times he might find it more expedient to pound away with the best he has in the first three minutes.

But yesterday I realized that living with my Type A wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, might also be compared to a boxing match because even if the boxer has all the skills and is stout of heart, he still might be overwhelmed by a more determined opponent. The alarm clock rings and before my eyes can open to face a new day she reminds me that I have to take out two windows first thing so she can paint them. Before I can get the windows out, Marsha asks me to carry the wash up the cellar stairs, and while I'm doing that she says that the lawnmower has to be filled with oil and gas. I am not yet dazed but am reminded that I have to attend Sarah's wedding which is the same Grange night that three bed & breakfast guests are coming for supper. At this point I have started to

stagger but as I vacuum while eating my breakfast I am not yet on the ropes. While taking out the windows I am also filling the lawnmower with gas which is when I learn that the food scrap bucket is starting to stink and has to be thrown in the woods for the wild animals, and because they can eat and digest everything except pita bread, I don't even dare go down there, and the bottles and paper have to be taken to the dump, which isn't even called the dump any more and now looks more like a drive through restaurant. I think about this to divert my mind from the fact that I'm being hammered on the ropes and I am on my way to the canvas. She is going to visit her new grandchild Maddy in Fort Kent for a few days and please use this bread first for my toast and be sure to eat this and don't eat that and don't forget to make the bed while she's gone and fix the cord in the fan and take a shower and don't forget deodorant, and if she says anything after that I don't hear it because I'm down for the count.

~

While clicking through the channels the other day, I heard this exchange between two men dressed in business suits. I have no idea of what the program was or what happened later. All I heard was what the man standing said to the young man sitting in the chair, "Your daddy's money is not going to keep you out of prison—well, actually it might."

~

My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, recently put a small card on my desk and asked me if I'd look up her friend's website. Of course the website that her friend sent was wrong and I had to Google around until I found it. In the process I read the note that her friend had written on the card. In this note Marsha's friend described her husband as open and caring. I showed it to my wife and said, "Open and caring. I hope you never describe me to anyone as Open & Caring." And Marsha said, "She's a psychologist—she talks that way."

~

Do you remember when you could do things that you cannot do today? I'm talking here about man made laws. Are things moving too fast for you in the present world? Are you concerned about your loss of civil liberties? You might remember when a very cheery and contented Santa Claus smiled up at you from your favorite book as pipe smoke curled around his ears. Remember those good old pictures? And, to move up a generation or two, you might remember when the Cookie Monster gorged himself on cookies. *Mmmm Coookies*. And right there on the television screen the Cookie Monster ate plate after plate of the kind of warm, sugary ginger snaps that my wife Marsha bakes especially for you. But now, no more will the Cookie Monster wolf down cookies right there on the

screen before millions of his young fans. Did you know that? First they took away Santa Claus's pipe. Then they took away the Cookie Monster's cookies. Where will it end? When will they be coming for you?

~

Remember the good old let boys play with dolls and girls play with trucks? As recently as 1957 even the famous anthropologist Ashley Montague subscribed to it. But now they know that the program was a hoax and a fraud. It seems that boys and girls are pre-wired and the environmental and cultural factors are negligible. I thought I was a very destructive child, but discovered on a web site that by taking an axe to old cast iron parlor stoves, and concrete steps, I was manifesting normal little boy behavior. The next level of difference between boys and girls has to do with gender-specific personality traits which affect how children learn.

First, a word about gender-specific personality traits. In the 1950s and 60s and 70s, it was fashionable to assume that gender differences in personality were "culturally constructed." Back then, psychologists thought that if we raised Johnny to play with dolls and Sally to play with trucks—then many of these gender differences would vanish. However, cross-cultural studies over the past thirty years have provided little support for this hypothesis. Here is one of the challenges teachers face: the girl who gets straight A's but thinks she's stupid and feels discouraged, and the boy who's barely getting B's but thinks he's brilliant. Consequently, the most basic difference in teaching style for girls versus boys is that you want to encourage the girls, build them up, while you give the boys a reality check: make them realize they're not as brilliant as they think they are, and challenge them to do better.—For all the good it will do, I might add. -If you want to get eighth-grade girls interested in chemistry, show the girls how chemistry can be used to improve the world. Let them build natural biochemical filters to clean dirty water, so they can see how the water becomes fresh and clean. If you want to get eighth-grade boys interested in chemistry, teach them about dynamite. Can't you see yourself standing before the school board the following week saying, "How was I to know..."

~

My wife, Marsha, is the Almost Perfect Woman. When you're been single for fifty-one of your sixty-nine years, you know how scary some women can be, because you've had the opportunity to read the service manuals on several different models. For some reason that I've never understood, some women can't just say what they have to say. They look at you and say, "We've got to have a talk." So one day I thanked Marsha because she had never said to me, "Robert—we've got to have a talk." And she said, "Talk. What good would it do to have a talk with you? You don't hear half of what I say—and I can't tell what you do hear because you don't say

anything. You always say that nothing is worth discussing unless it's a life or death situation or if somebody is going to lose a limb. You're just like my father." That can happen when you marry a younger woman—her father usually is just about your age.

~

Steve Dennison brought my cows over today. They will be two years old come July and they are getting to be big boys. I can't keep them over the winter so Steve, who already has twenty or thirty head, has wintered them for me for the past two years. The grass was getting pretty green when I went over to see him and said, "Steve, I don't want to rush you, but you're welcome to bring them cows over to my house any time you get around to it." And Steve says, "That reminds me. Do you remember selling me that wood loading conveyor thirty or so years ago?" And I remembered that I'd sold it to someone but I couldn't remember who it was. And Steve says, "I came by your house one day and asked you if you'd like to sell that wood loader and you said you'd think about it. Three years later I came by your house again and said, 'Robert, I don't want to rush you, but do you want to sell that wood loader?'"

~

Booth Tarkington wrote *Penrod* in 1913. Chapter 19 is a litany of the things Penrod consumed in one afternoon. Candy, lobster croquettes, an extraordinarily large pickle, a glass of raspberry lemonade, a box of sardines, and a half pint of lukewarm cider. Mug in hand, a gentle glow radiating toward his surface from various centers of activity deep inside him, he then ate a slice of watermelon, a bag of peanuts, a box of popcorn larded with partially boiled molasses, three waffles thickly powdered with sugar, a slab of Neopolitan ice cream, and two and one half wieners. Because you might be having supper right now, I'm not going to tell you what happened next. But Penrod's lack of intestinal fortitude came to mind last night when, for the first time in our marriage, my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, was suddenly struck down. She never gets sick, so I couldn't believe it was the flu and I asked her what she had eaten since supper. Do you believe peanuts, popcorn, a large Dairy Queen chocolate sundae that a friend had left in our freezer, and a diet coke? Just the diet coke would have finished me.

~

You know that ever since I found out who you are, I have been in awe of you. Thank you for listening. It is an honor and privilege to chat here with you every week. You have earned the respect of your intelligent friends who can recognize and appreciate ability. One of the other things I've learned about you, is that you have a remarkable mind. It is like a steel trap. You never forget anything so I know you remember our recent

chat about the words we casually let drop to indicate our status in the community. We mention our clubs and the famous people we might have met over the past ten years. I wonder if social commentators like John Steinbeck or Michael Moor or Sinclair Lewis, who had to go to Europe to be appreciated for their genius and collect their prizes, *needed* to mention it to their friends?—Anyway, aren't these awards that you have had thrust upon you the ones that count? You didn't go looking for it. You didn't ask to be teacher or citizen of the year. You went about minding your own business and you were amazed when the award came looking for you. I remember the first time it happened to me. It was 1952, I was sitting next to Roy Swanson in the Tenants Harbor Baptist church, and they were about to announce the high school manual training woodworking award for the year. Roy and I both knew that it would go to our very clever classmate Ralph who was the best carpenter in the entire high school since Robert Polky had graduated. When they called my name I can still remember that Roy and I looked at each other with our mouths open. Fifty three years later, I was once again startled and flattered by yet another unearned honor. This morning, by first class mail from Machias, I was awarded an honorary life time membership in the Maine Black fly Breeders Association.

~

My wife Marsha's friend Donna is very generous, and I mentioned it to her one time. Donna was raised on a hen farm over in Waldoboro by Seidenspacker Pond. She had four or five brothers and sisters and Donna said, "I learned to share at an early age. If I didn't give them what they wanted, they took it anyway."

~

My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, and I were looking at a DVD movie on one of those little computer disks the other night. Marsha is a charter member and fanatical supporter of our local video rental store. And I read on the screen that if you copy the movie on this DVD computer disk the FBI will batter down the doors to your home, you will be fined $250,000 and you will go to jail for five years. A good friend of mine got in a drunken brawl and blew a man away. Bam. He only served three years for killing a man but I would have to serve five if I copied a movie. Years from now, people will think of our era as that transitional period when a man's life was no longer worth as much as a plastic disk containing a Spiderman movie.

~

I got a very interesting email from Glenn who writes:"It is said that 86% of Americans believe in God. Therefore I have a very hard time understanding why there is such a mess about having 'In God We Trust' on our

money and having God in the Pledge of Allegiance. Why don't we just tell the 14% to Sit Down and SHUT UP!" I was thinking about this just before I got Glenn's email, and although I'm the last person to tell anyone to sit down and shut up for any reason, I am one of the millions of people who don't think it hurts a thing to pay lip service whether you believe or not. Lip service don't cost you nothing—and you aren't hurting anyone. It is just like having compassion for poor people. Why shouldn't you and I have compassion for unfortunate people? Compassion is not like universal health care. Having compassion for poor people doesn't take a minute of your time. And think how good it makes you feel to stand up there and say that you have compassion when it doesn't cost you or any of your friends a cent.

~

You will be glad to hear that we finally caught Knox County's infamous peeping Tom. We used video cameras to record everything he did all day from the time he got up until he went to bed, until we finally got him.

~

Everyone knows that "How Are You?" is no more than a formal standardized form of, "You are in my space. This is what my voice sounds like. What does your voice sound like?" The amount of space in which one feels comfortable before one feels obligated to speak differs from place to place. Russell Baker claimed that New Yorkers walk about like zombies, never making eye contact for fear of being accosted. Crocodile Dundee, on the other hand, is a classic example of a rural person who speaks to everyone he sees.

You know of cultures and countries where this "How Are You," "I Am Fine" type of conversation can be carried on by simply raising an eyebrow and shrugging a shoulder. Many suprasegmental phonemes employed by the French and Italians are body language. To end the conversation, all you'd have to do is tie their hands. My wife Marsha comes into the room and I know I've done something wrong just from her posture and the expression on her face. Remember Jiggs and Maggie in *Bringing Up Father*? Maggie always had one hand on her hip and her chin down with one eye looking up at the ceiling. You probably know of married couples who have refined their ability to communicate to the point where they haven't said a word to each other for years.

On the other hand, I was once asked to contribute my Spaghetti For The Single Person recipe to the *Maine Writers' Cookbook*. And, because I was born and raised on the coast of Maine, I was genetically and culturally programmed to unload my whole life's history before even listing the ingredients.

You will remember from Mark Twain's Jumping Frog story, that years ago, way out there in the wild west, there were people who would back

you into a corner and then talk for hours without saying anything. Today you'll hear many of them hosting shows on talk radio.

~

Do you miss the good old songs you used to hear? I don't see any sense in these rap songs they sing nowadays, do you? Back when I was a kid they sang songs like, Chickery Chick, chala chala, chekala romy, in a bananica, bolika wollica—and they made sense. This morning I got to thinking that it had been a long time since I had heard *I'm a Ding Dong Daddy from Dumas*. You know you're old when you realize that you miss the good old songs. Old people have always cried that they no longer hear the good old songs. You probably recall Aristophanes' story about the young man who sneered at his father when the old man requested someone sing one of the good old songs called *Simoides' Shearing of the Ram*. The kid had to explain to his father that *Simoides' Ram* was a corny old song. Do you hear the same thing from your children and grandchildren? Do they listen to music that you can't understand or appreciate? You might have seen a TV program advertised on which they promised to play the forty worst songs from last year. Did it make you wonder how they could be sure they got the right ones?

~

You might have seen that documentary on *Sammy the Bull* who ratted out his Mafia buddies in return for a new life. How does that work? Does the FBI give informants a pension and a new house where they can spend their golden years pining away in repentance? Psychologists could have told the FBI that Type A individuals who are really good at what they do often long to go back to work, and that Sammy the Bull was one of them. Before he unpacked his suitcase, Sammy the Bull was back in the business he understood and enjoyed. Of course because he had immunity from his past crimes, the police had to put together a whole new case from scratch. Will you tell me why it is so difficult to collect and present evidence that will put bad people in jail? Let's go back to the program called *Cops*. The camera is on a fellow in a stolen car that the police are following at speeds in excess of one hundred miles per hour. A police helicopter in the air also has a spotlight and a camera on the car. Suddenly, the car crosses the median strip and heads the wrong way on an interstate highway. An hour later, after riding on no tires and sparking, smoking rims, the car catches fire and stops. A dozen or more police cars involved in the chase converge on the burning vehicle, someone smashes out a window in the car, and the driver is dragged out and handcuffed—at which time we hear a voice over that says, "All suspects are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law."

~

One of the most flattering letters I ever got from a radio friend said something like this, "Please, humble, don't get into social issues. Everything you say makes sense and I don't want to believe it."—But if I don't occasionally try to say something that makes sense here on public radio, where else can you hear it? You have heard me say that if I do not have at least one meaningful comment for you every week, I do not deserve to sit behind this microphone. My function is to educate as well as to entertain. Last week I know I said something that you needed to hear—two people asked to be removed from my Whine & Snivel mailing list.

~

While Googling Mad Cow Disease, I stumbled on a web page that not only told me about Mad Cow Disease but informed me that Ann Veneman, a recent U.S. Secretary of Agriculture for four or so years, was a former lobbyist for Monsanto and Dole, two giants of corporate agriculture. Isn't that like making the owner of an ammunition factory the Secretary of Peace? I wish I hadn't seen this. It is not the kind of thing you or anybody else wants to know about, because it is very unsettling. It reminded me that I haven't read 1984 for at least a year and I'll have to read it again tonight. Talk about asking the fox to watch the henhouse. You know, real life is getting to be stranger than fiction. How did we come to live in such a surrealistic society? How much longer can we survive?

~

Galileo made a number of important astronomical discoveries which convinced him of the validity of Copernicus's geocentric theory, which, as you know is that the earth moves around the sun rather than that the sun moves around the earth. In 1632 when Galileo published his *Dialogue on Two Chief World Systems*. The Inquisition promptly summoned him to Rome, where he reluctantly recanted and was sentenced to house arrest for the rest of his life. Are teachers now allowed to tell their students that the earth moves around the sun, or would teaching these controversial new scientific discoveries in your school stir up unnecessary and unwanted trouble? If you really wanted to teach kids that the earth moves around the sun, you might be able to keep your job if you suggest that it's only one of several unproven new theories. After all, three or four hundred years really isn't too much time when it comes to getting something new to be accepted by the general public. And, by the way, make sure that you don't tell third grade students something that they aren't supposed to know until they're in the fifth grade. It raises the devil with learning results if smart kids do two years in one. One of my radio friends is on a school board in New Hampshire and while reviewing the curriculum he noticed that there was nothing in there about teaching evolution. The superintendent said that it was an intentional omission as he didn't

want to stir up trouble. I wouldn't push it, would you? Just sit back and wait quietly for another couple of hundred years.

~

Yes, I admit to recycling. Some weeks I have more rants than I can work into a fifty-five minute radio program, but some weeks either I never get to talk one on one with you, my friends who educate me with your comments about life in Maine, or I don't have time to copy your comments from my workbook, so I recycle. I once saw Angus King stand on a stage in my back yard and tell an audience that he could see that democrats believed in recycling: they were supporting Governor Brennan for another term. I thought that was very clever. And I should mention here that Angus King is one of the two most articulate men I have ever seen speak from a platform in Maine. And if I had some heavy agenda I wanted to push, I'd try to get Angus to be the spokesman. And all this came to mind only because Steve told me that his minister admitted that he recycled his sermons. The minister said that the only thing he changed was the jokes because that was the only part of his sermon the congregation remembered.

~

For some reason that I have only recently begun to understand, my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, and I get invited to a lot of art show openings. Although the art world certainly realizes by now that we are not patrons, we apparently provide the extra bony elbows that are required at a well-packed successful show, so we go just to help out at as many as we can. I especially like shows at Linda Bean Jones' art gallery in Tenants Harbor because all of the people stand in the middle of the floor drinking wine which makes it easy to walk around the four walls and look at the paintings.

~

To understand this, if it is possible for anyone to understand this at all, it would help to know that in 1988 they released a movie called *Mystic Pizza*. I mention this because I had never heard of *Mystic Pizza*. Listen. My friend Sally, who delights me with her conversation, said, "I went to see *Mystic Pizza* and it catapulted this woman—What's-her-name?—Made what's-her-name so famous that she's now a household word.

~

You might have heard somewhere that the National Rifle Association is pulling its 2007 convention out of Columbus, Ohio because Columbus has banned some kind of gun. We can of course understand and respect that decision. Would you want your favorite organization to hold its annual meeting in any town where you couldn't buy an assault weapon.

~

When I make a mistake, I'm the first person to admit it. And I made a mistake. A while back a leaky inner tube on my bicycle refused to accept any more patches and I spent three or four dollars on a new tube. Yesterday I was down to the dump and when I saw a bicycle in the trash pile I said to myself, "I will take that bicycle home with me for spare parts and I will buy big fat bicycle tires and inner tubes no more." And when I got the bicycle home I said to myself, "The only thing this bicycle needs is a nut on the rear wheel. I wonder what will happen if I put a nut on the rear wheel?" So I pumped up the tires and I put the nut on the rear wheel and I got on it and rode around in the dooryard on this five or ten speed bike and the gears worked and it went slick as a whistle. And it reminded me that back in 1943 or so my grandmother had to cook for Prince Nicimi up on Chestnut Street in Camden for two weeks or so to earn money enough to buy me a second hand bicycle.

So what am I going to do with this bicycle I got on the dump? I did not plan to keep this bicycle, I brought this bicycle home because the tires looked OK, but now I have no idea of how I am ever going to get rid of it. There is a lesson to be learned here but the only person who knows what it is, is a bachelor who has invited a desperate young divorcee into his home for just the weekend.

~

Because I have many friends and many guests from all over who are kind enough to visit our Bed & Breakfast and farm, I constantly hear strange and mysterious things. Of course, being the most uncompromising gossip in Maine, I can't wait to pass these items along to you. Richard said that after entering a Parisian restaurant he noticed that there was a dog seated on the lap of the person at the next table and that the person and the dog were both happily munching away—probably on a plate of escargo or pom fritts. Being a very uptight and narrow minded person, Richard asked to be moved to another table. Which was not really any better because from his new seat he could see that the cook had a dog in the kitchen helping him prepare food. It has been years since I have idly roamed the streets of Paris and when I was there I never went into a restaurant, but I'd like to hear what you have to say. Dogs. Paris. Hearing this story reminded Victoria, who was at the other end of our table, that the last time she was in Paris she heard a sucking, slurping sound. It was a man in a white uniform who was driving some kind of mobile vacuum cleaner. He was sucking up all the hunder poop—I think hunder poop is a French idiom—this man was vacuuming all the hunder poop off the sidewalks. You know about these things. Please, tell me what it is that lends Paris its charm—and would you want it tracked into your home.

~

You might remember that a few weeks ago I asked you if it were necessary for the speaker at a funeral to convey a message or if unloading an assortment of disjointed phrases was enough to fulfill some psychological need. You will not be surprised to hear that since then I have heard a minister speak very well. And since then I have also attended a funeral where I found myself sitting up so I wouldn't miss one word. I don't cry at funerals and I don't laugh out loud at funerals, but this speaker made me do both—at the same time. He was a powerful, powerful speaker. He is one of those rare, commanding personalities who is able to stand before a group and motivate and educate his listeners with a few well-chosen unforgettable and meaningful words, and if you've had the pleasure of hearing him, you know what I'm talking about. He is actually one of the two best speakers I've ever heard in Maine. Unfortunately for organized religion, he isn't a minister. He's my brother.

~

My friend Sandy has a beautiful daughter who is getting married soon. I said that the daughter is beautiful, and she is, but she also has that extra long term lasting inner beauty that you can't see and that you only become aware of after you've known her for a while. Which makes Sandy's daughter very much like my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman. Sandy said that they are presently planning the wedding, and because Sandy is a very smart man I have no doubt that his daughter's wedding will be just like the one Marsha and I had fourteen or so years ago. Perhaps you were at our wedding, but in case you weren't, and in case you are also getting ready to get married, you should know that there is lot of planning and actual on-site preparation that can exhaust you.

This is what you have to do to prepare for a wedding. First decide where on your backyard you plan to have the ceremony. We were lucky, because Gramp Wiley had just built a new doorstep for his trailer and had thrown the old one away. So we simply dragged the old doorstep over to our back yard so we could stand on that. Next we wrote up an invitation that said that we were getting married, I can't remember now what day it was, but you put the date and time in there. And you say that everyone is invited to a pot luck wedding and to bring food. And of course you have to put your address in there so your friends and the idly curious can find it and then you run that wedding invitation in all the newspapers so that everyone knows about it. People who say that weddings happen by themselves and require no planning don't know what they're talking about. You have to put your ad in all the newspapers to invite everyone to come and to bring food and you have to get a minister. Because I married a widow Marsha simply recycled the minister she'd used the first time which saved us a bother. Then you get a mess of sawhorses and 4-by-8

sheets of plywood and that makes your tables which you put out on the lawn to hold the food. Around three hundred people showed up at our wedding and everyone seemed to have a great time. And if you have the right kind of friends, you'll have enough food left over to last you a couple of weeks. You can see why more and more people are tying the knot that way. It doesn't cost you anything. No one feels slighted because everyone is invited. We even had an auction afterwards, that was written up in the *Maine Antique Digest* with photographs, and what we sold at the auction paid for the ads in the newspapers, so we broke even on the deal. Oh, and our marriage has already lasted fourteen years. I've been to some expensive weddings that didn't produce a marriage lasting past two children. Tell me if you had more fun at your wedding.

~

For a month or so I've been draining some honey frames into a plastic tub. But I finally scraped the honey from the plastic tub into a steel pan and put that inside of a larger steel pan that was full of boiling water. And I soon had over a quart of honey that was warm enough to run through a funnel and a cloth which strained out all the visible impurities. While I was doing this, I asked my wife Marsha if warming up the honey would destroy any of its goodness. You know, destroy the molecular structure or break down any of the chemical properties. And she said that I didn't need to worry about what I did to honey because honey had been found in Egyptian tombs.

Why is it that the Egyptian tombs are usually evoked as a symbol of renaissance or everlasting endurance? Suppose you asked Heron Breen if the 1998 cucumber seeds that you got at FedCo were still good. What you want to bet he'd say, "Well, Mort Mather planted some cucumber seeds that he found in an Egyptian tomb and the cucumbers that were small enough to fit through the door won prizes at the Common Ground Fair." I wouldn't eat one of those cucumbers because I can believe that anyone who did would probably have an uncontrollable urge to clutch an asp to his breast. But—do you think you could find an eleventh dynasty tomb in Thebes today where you couldn't walk in and stumble on a bundle of papyri revealing lentils, garlic or sesame seeds that are eager to burst forth into vigorous production? What do you know about the value of old seeds? Unless I hear from you I'm not going to say another thing on this topic because I just remembered that my grandfather was fifty-seven when my mother was born.

~

If I were you, I would watch out for people who aspire to garner the hearts and minds of men. Because only by going through your heart and mind can they get their hands on your wallet.

~

My project for this week is hooking up the telephone line in our bedroom for my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman. There is a telephone outlet in the bedroom but it doesn't work and I can't remember how that outlet got there. Our house was built in 1811 so the outlet isn't part of the original construction. I know I put that outlet in there, but I can't figure out how I did it. I'm probably going to have to run another line in, but I'm going to sleep on it for a while. If you are lucky, you are able to think about projects without rushing into them, because in some households there are people wielding great power who want it done now. Do you know who I'm talking about? Don't think about it—just do it. John told me that he started to restore a Volkswagen for his daughter's high school graduation. But John hasn't finished it yet and she's now twenty-nine and has a three year old son. Does that tell you something about a man's propensity for procrastination—or is it an indication of his daughter's struggle with our educational system?

~

Some people never learn. This evening my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, heaped my plate with chicken and rice and gravy. My plate was so full that eating it became an onerous chore rather than a delightful gastronomical experience. I looked at it and felt full before I even started. The only way I can get a small, comfortable amount and then perhaps go back for just a smidgen of seconds is to load my plate myself. Wouldn't you think that after seventeen years I would know enough to watch that plate from her hands? She always puts more on my plate than I can eat, but I never seem to learn. Which reminds me of something you might have recently seen on the evening news. Old men who were trying to kill each other sixty years ago are now shaking hands and talking about old times. I almost said, "Sharing memories." I wonder if eighty-year-old Civil War soldiers from both sides ever got together at Manassas or Petersburg to talk about their war. You might know about historical perspective and I'd appreciate having you tell me a little bit about it. From what little I've seen and been able to remember over the past sixty-five years, within thirty to forty years after a war, soldiers from both sides will find an excuse to walk together over old battlefields or to talk over old times over coffee. You might have also noticed that anyone who goes into a small country and trains the young folk in military ways and provides them with the latest hardware, only has to wait a year or two before they see if they hadn't.

~

My friend Sally paints pictures of lighthouses. It is not unusual to find people on the coast of Maine who paint lighthouses, but Sally lives far from the ocean in Virginia. What makes Sally unusual among artists is

that she doesn't display her pictures. She doesn't try to sell them. I think she should because she did one painting of a fish factory that is so good that you can smell it. Which makes me wonder how many Maine artists have rubbed bait on the back of a painting just to increase its salability with some intangible organic ambiance. I'm going to see if I can't get Sally to put some of her pictures into a Maine gallery next summer. Linda Bean Jones has got a nice gallery down the road in Tenants Harbor and Sally would fit right in there. Of course I wouldn't want anyone who knows about art to know that I like Sally's paintings because that would destroy her right there. I like artists like Barbara Ernst Pray and Bjorn Rundquist and Andy Wyeth and Bradley Hendershot which proves that I don't know anything about real art anyway. I'd never make a good critic because I admire artists who paint houses and places I recognize. And I admire artists who actually get paid for their work. And when Sally showed my photos of her paintings it reminded me that Priscilla Adam's daughter—I think she is a sculptor—was offered something in the neighborhood of $600 for her first work. She wouldn't sell it, which upset Priscilla, her mother. And the kid said that this was her baby, her creation and she said, "Would you have sold me for $600?" And Priscilla said, "I never had such an offer."

~

Two or three years ago I had around 700 Nigerian emails in my computer. I can't remember why I was saving them because they're sad letters. They are letters written by lawyers or ministers—family friends of a lonely someone without children, aunts, siblings, or cousins. This person died in a plane crash or was poisoned by his business partners. And what makes it really sad is, every man jack of them had from twenty to seventy-eight million dollars in a big black box. I know what you're going to say. Of course you probably don't want to die even if you haven't got a cent to your name, but think how much worse someone feels about dying when they have twenty million dollars in ready money lying around in a box. It would be just like dying with five cords of dried and split birch stacked neatly in your barn. You did all the work and next winter somebody else is going to be toasting popcorn over your crackling fire with your wife. But—I have been studying these Nigerian letters for several years now, and I'm noticing a pattern. The landscape is littered with hundreds of thousands of people who died in a plane crash or a car crash or a train wreck and every single one of them left umpteen million dollars behind and no heirs. Nigeria must be a strange place, indeed, because the minute you stop breathing in the state of Maine, the man in charge of selling your trailer is going to be mobbed by relatives you haven't heard from in years.

~

Jem Voyaga. That's French for "I like to travel." The first time I went to Europe I was twenty-four years old. I had just flunked out of The Crane Department of Music in Potsdam, New York, because I couldn't learn to play the clarinet, so having nothing else to do, I went to Sweden and sponged off my aunts long enough to learn to speak Swedish with a Maine accent. Det vet la du som har vart dar, Olle. After I married a beautiful, young, widow named Marsha Van Zandbergen, who is on very good terms with her first husband's relatives in Holland, I have had even more reasons to go to Europe.

If you've been abroad a few times, you probably know that Europeans think that all Americans are loud, obnoxious, and bossy. So many Americans have bragged about how much better and bigger everything is in The United States, that the French and Germans really expect you to do it, too. They've kind of got their guard up, so to speak, and when they show you something they'll say, "Well, this is pretty good, we like it, but you've probably got bigger or better ones in America."

I saw an example of this last month in a museum in Holland. Four hundred years ago this museum was a torture chamber and the guide showed me all kinds of horrible devices they used to torment people. We were almost all the way through the place when the guide smiled and said, "Can't you hear people screaming, 'Enough, enough. No more. I can't stand it any more.' You've got to admit you don't have anything as bad as this in America."

I didn't have the heart to tell him about the "Imus in the Morning" radio show.

~

Had a great time at the WERU fair in Blue Hill, thanks to you, and was pleased to meet so many friends there. I really enjoy meeting you. You can always recognize lawyers or people with PhDs in sociology because at first they always dress a bit shabbier than the rest of us—doing their best to fit in. So because I got a chance to talk with you, Blue Hill was a pleasurable as well as valuable learning experience for me. As I was leaving the fair I was greeted by a handsome young man, I believe his name is Ken. And Ken was dragging a huge cart through the fairgrounds. Ken said that he last saw me at the Common Ground Fair, and that I said something there that embarrassed him tremendously. You know that I would never intentionally say or do anything to embarrass or offend you, although I must admit that if you do want to press me to the limit—if you really want to yank my strings, you can light up a cigarette in my doorway or else ask me for something without giving me your mailing address that tells me where to send it. Anyway, Ken said that I shook his hand at the Common Ground Fair—but when I shook hands with the girl

who was with him, I looked at him and said, "How in the world can you sleep with a girl who has such icy cold hands?" And he said that embarrassed him tremendously—because he wasn't able to answer my question until the next morning.

~

Public service announcement here. "A bystander may be able to spot someone having a stroke by giving the person a simple, quick test to see if they can smile, raise both arms and keep them up, and speak a simple sentence coherently. The test, which takes less than one minute, has helped healthcare professionals accurately identify stroke patients. If bystanders can relay results of this test to an emergency dispatcher, it could speed treatment to stroke patients. Time is crucial in treating stroke." My father had a stroke, so I know that people who have had a stroke are very much like those who are having a heart attack. The first thing they want to do is take a bath, shave and put on their best clothes before even thinking about calling 9-1-1. You might remember the man we recently talked about who had a heart attack but wouldn't go to the hospital until he first drove his dog to the boarding kennel. Please listen closely. Time is crucial in treating stroke. If they get you in time, you might live to shave and put on clean clothes another day.

1. *Ask the individual to SMILE.
2. *Ask them to RAISE BOTH ARMS.
3. *Ask the person to SPEAK A SIMPLE SENTENCE.

If he or she has trouble with any of these tasks, call 9-1-1 immediately and describe the symptoms to the dispatcher.

After discovering that a group of non medical volunteers could identify facial weakness, arm weakness and speech problems, researchers urged the general public to learn the three questions. They presented their conclusions at the American Stroke Association's annual meeting last February. Widespread use of this test could result in prompt diagnosis and treatment of the stroke and prevent brain damage.

~

Nice letter here from John, who says, "Dear humble, You know, the test for stroke that you announced as being something new isn't new at all. It must be almost thirty years ago that I saw a man on TV being tested. He was entering a helicopter at the time, turned around just before going on board and did the test. He 1. raised his arms in the air; 2. smiled; and 3. spoke a simple sentence: 'I am not a crook!'"

~

I think about things. If you also think about things, it might be because you don't have enough to do and I suggest that you find something to

occupy your hands. This is why they say idle hands are the devil's workshop. If you are busy you can't think and thinking does not always give you a productive feeling of well being. This morning I was thinking about James Bond, which you might agree is about as unproductive as you can get when it comes to thinking. Because you have never wasted your time thinking about Bond, James Bond, you should know that James Bond is a good guy who zips about the globe while fighting powerful evil men. And for years I wondered how evil men like Dr. No and Goldfinger could find seemingly expendable cadres of people to aid them in their bloody pursuits of world domination and economic gain. I hope you won't think about this, because if you do, you will realize, as I just did, that there are millions of people out there who honestly like them.

~

I can't remember who sent me this news item, but I want to thank you. Senators William B. Spong of Virginia and Hiram Fong of Hawaii sponsored a bill recommending the mass ringing of church bells to welcome the arrival in Hong Kong of the U.S. table tennis team, after its tour of Communist China. The bill failed to pass, which deprived us of the Spong-Fong Hong Kong Ping Pong Ding Dong Bell Bill.

~

Are we born incompetent or is it thrust upon us? After fifteen years of being married to Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, I now wonder how I survived my twenty years between thirty-four and fifty-four as a bachelor. I might now be compared to an appendage that has atrophied from lack of use because I no longer know how to do anything. What do you suppose would happen to me if I ran through a load of wash and hung it on the line? There is no way on this green earth that I would do it right. If you're married to a Type A woman you know what happens when you try to help by making the bed. Yes. She tears it apart and makes it right, with the corners tucked in and the sheet folded down at the top—even though Martha Stewart couldn't tell the difference when the bedspread is on. You finally give up because she says it is easier for her to do it right the first time than it is to tear your work apart and then do it over again. Mow the lawn and she mows it again the same evening with the blade set down to the dirt. Help her with the dishes? Only if you do want trouble in your marriage. You might have heard some of our young so-called experts bleating the mantra, "You have to work at a marriage. Marriage takes a lot of work and effort." This is not true. I never worked at our marriage and I never will. For fifteen years I have simply stood back and got out of the way.

~

Here's a letter from long time radio listener Kevin Barnard in Ogunquit, who has also been a good personal friend now for almost twenty years. Kevin made most of those beautiful redwood signs all inlaid with gold leaf that you see down in Ogunquit. Kevin just wrote me this about his handsome brother Mark, who is a famous womanizer: "Mark has been down to one woman for some time now. I had to pick him up at the York Hospital yesterday." Good luck Mark. I'm married to one like that myself.

~

My brother-in-law Mark Sisco recently called to tell me that in a Mark Trail comic strip, Mark Trail is standing on an oyster bar, ankle deep in water, surrounded by hungry sharks. Mark Trail is saying, "I'm in big trouble. I'm surrounded by sharks on this oyster bar and the tide is going out." My brother in law thought that this was funny and said that Mark Trail wasn't going to get in trouble as long as the tide was going out. But anyone who thinks about this knows that although only a very few men have been eaten by sharks, many men have been undone after eating a few oysters.

~

You can learn a lot about a man by simply going into his bathroom and seeing how many extra holes he had to drill in the wall to put up his towel racks.

~ More Rants ~

This week I cut down a couple of huge cherry trees that had died on the dump and I used my chainsaw to peel off all the soft rotted wood on the outside. And I got to thinking that you could compare me with a half rotted cherry tree. Once you get it cleaned up it *will* get you through a cold night.

~

The Common Ground Fair has come and gone and it was to my way of thinking the best fair ever. I was assigned a spot in front of the MPBN tent so I got to talk with you. This year I spoke with not dozens but hundreds of radio friends. My most unforgettable moment? I was talking with six or eight friends when another couple showed up. Nice looking young girl around twenty-five to thirty and her friend. She looked at me and said, "Hot." And of course being deaf I leaned toward her and said, "What." And she said, "Hot. You are hot. I have listened to that sexy voice for years but I had no idea that you were such a..." and she licked her lips and kind of moaned and squirmed with her entire body. And I said, "What do you do?" And the fellow with her said, "She doesn't have a job yet. They just let her out yesterday."

~

What do you do? That is the question I asked you at the Common Ground Fair. One beautiful young girl told me that she was an actress. I almost laughed in her face. I said, "How in the world can you make a living as an actress in Maine?" She said, "My husband is a doctor."

~

Last week you heard me mention that one of my radio friends is looking for toupees. She is a feminist, which is one of America's last walking anachronisms, and she told me at the Common Ground Fair that she was going to make a rug out of toupees. But since last week she sent me a clipping of her ad in the Portsmouth newspaper. It says. "Seeking used

toupees for art project. Any style/condition/color. Anonymity guaranteed." I suppose making a rug could be considered an art project, but I wonder about the "anonymity guaranteed" bit. Does that mean that just in case you stole it somewhere she is not going to ask you where you got it? Why would you not want people to know if you sold a used car or a used toupee? What difference does it make? There is a picture of a toupee in this ad she sent me and if you didn't know what it was you could probably go to jail for sending the picture through the mails. But I'm probably missing something here with this anonymity guaranteed. I'd like you to tell me what it is I'm not reading between the lines.

~

Ever hear just a snatch of a conversation and wonder what they were talking about? First thing in the morning I was standing outside the gate at the Common Ground Fair with two vendor passes in my hand. You know—waiting for you to come up to me and say, "Hey humble, love your show. Gimme them passes." And while I was standing there a young couple walked by and the young guy was talking. And if you were the girl who was walking along with him, please send me a note so we'll all know what he was talking about. All I heard was, "... and then a little bit of drool fell out of her mouth onto my forehead..."

~

I was telling my friend Dan about the Common Ground Fair. Everybody goes. Everyone enjoys watching the little dogs that herd the sheep. Dan said, "Ugh. Don't *ever* get a border collie." He said that he was once with a bunch of dog walkers out in the woods and without noticing what had happened the border collies had herded all their owners together. They were all so close they were touching—shoulder to shoulder and chest to chest. I hope you lonely young people in big cities are listening.

~

All I know about this is what I heard, and it seems as someone got blind drunk and then staggered off, bare butt naked, and tried to start a fire on the floor of a nearby woodshed. Upon hearing this I quickly whipped out the little notebook you've seen me carry on my right pant leg. I wrote down the following salient points. Please listen closely. The property owner heard the commotion outside and dialed 9-1-1. By this time, the drunk's friends had found him and put out the fire. Meanwhile the drunk had run off into the woods, still bare butt naked. Later, a fireman reported seeing him out on the main road so the property owner once again called 9-1-1, this time to alert the sheriff. And when the dispatcher was told that a naked man was staggering down the road bear butt naked, she licked her lips and said, "Can you give me a description?"

~

You've heard me tell about the very determined vacuum cleaner salesman who knocked on a door down Harpswell way. The woman who answered said that she didn't have time to look at any vacuum cleaners, but the salesman stuck his hand in through the door and emptied a small can of desiccated cow manure on her carpet. He said that if his machine didn't pick up every molecule of that cow manure, he would eat what was left. And the woman said, "I'm glad to hear it. Central Maine shut off my power yesterday."

~

Just had a chance to use my Spanish. The woman making the courtesy call for Discover Card had a strong Spanish accent, so when she asked if Marsha was home, I said, "Que lastimme." She asked, "So she's not home?" I said, "Claro." She said she'd call back later and I said, "Merci."

~

You might remember that I like beans and spaghetti and could happily live on them until the day I die. Please hear this letter from Brent: "Dear humble, I do find you unusually paradoxical since your erudition, intelligence, and academic history come across loud and clear on your show. You have a voracious passion and understanding of the social and cultural happenings around you, which are most often associated with sophistication and depth of knowledge/wisdom.....Whereas your culinary interests seem very basic and working class, that hearken to your youth, years of bachelorhood, addiction to your desk top, poverty, an artist caught up in the thrall of his muses???"—Thank you Brent. My discriminating taste when it comes to meals also applies to women, and is not regretted when I look around and see friends who were obviously hooked by their first entree.

~

Who hasn't heard of Oil of Olay? There is no question in my mind, that if a woman uses Oil of Olay between the ages of thirty and fifty, at the age of fifty she will have the same complexion she had at thirty—as long as she doesn't smoke and has never exposed her skin to the sun. I present to you this evidence that women who use Oil of Olay do so with the understanding that it is not a panacea and that eventually more drastic steps will be necessary. Please listen closely. A woman who was in a remarkable state of preservation recently sat at our Bed and Breakfast table. One wondered why this woman was traveling with a man old enough to be her father, until it was revealed, with fanfare, that she was fifty-five years old. I was not surprised that anyone fifty-five could look so much younger, and to prove my point I brought up the web page that contains pictures of my Radio Friends and showed her a picture that was taken of me when

I was fifty-five. I looked like a little kid. I told her that she would soon discover, as I did, that there comes a day when crow's feet do come home to roost. I told her that she would not know exactly when it happened, but on some quiet, unannounced day within the next fifteen years she would suddenly look her age. And that woman smiled at me and said, "Well, that's why they made paper bags."

~

There are people who are not suited to live in cold climates and I am one of them. Fortunately it is possible to buy insulated garments that keep heat in against your body and the cold out, and for countless people like me who can't stand the cold, sensible winter clothing is the only thing that makes November in Maine tolerable. By the first of October I'm already wearing socks and warm, woolly, boot-like things that keep my feet and ankles warm. Although I can't wear long johns because they make my ankles itch I do wear insulated pants over my dungarees. I put on a warm sweater and on top of that my snowmobile suit. It goes without saying that I have a knit watch cap that comes down over my ears. And, dressed like that, I can manage to stay toasty warm and comfortable —unless I have to go outdoors.

~

Do you jump up and obey every time your wife barks a command? If you are newly married you might. But those of us who enjoy marriages that might be compared to a butter nut squash just before the first frost—that is men who have marriages that have mellowed and ripened to a satisfying state of perfection, do not jump up at her first words. Any experienced husband will tell you why. No matter what my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman says, you can bet that as soon as she says it the little cogs and wheels in her head start to move—you know—to evaluate all of the attendant ramifications—and within thirty seconds she has changed her mind and says just the opposite. On the other hand, she thinks that I am wishy-washy—that is, that I don't really mean something when I say it, because—should I say, "two helpings of chicken is enough," she always says, "Are you sure?"

~

When you say to yourself, "I love my wife" what does that mean to you? Do you love her because she is pretty or because she has mastered the art of making you exotic culinary delights like Jell-O? Or do you love her simply because she tolerates you and seems to care for you in spite of everything? I want to tell you what makes my eyes get all weepy and what makes me say to myself, "I love that woman." More than anything, my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, loves to mow the lawn. She has a self propelled lawnmower that pulls her around and for years she'd

come home from eight hours of mowing grass and stacking wood and break out her mower and trot along behind it until it got so dark she couldn't see. It goes without saying that for years the grass on our lawn resembled the hair on the head of a Marine recruit. Marsha's ideal lawn is several acres of dry brown earth. She mows everything—right down to the dirt. Small trees and flowers on our farm are nothing but history. Ledges are ground down. A substantial stone bench and the privy have both been mysteriously moved, although she swears that she didn't go anywhere near them. But the proof is on her mower. It is a nice new mower, but it is covered with streaks of yellow paint—the color of our house. The carburetor and the muffler are severely dented and are streaked with the same tell-tale yellow paint. They each hang crazily by one bolt—no one knows how it happened, but the other bolts were snapped off by repeated sharp blows. And when I kneel down by that lawnmower and look at those streaks of yellow paint and see the flopping muffler and the sagging carburetor and the front end that looks like it has been beaten by a sledge hammer, my eyes get all weepy and I think to myself, "How I love that woman."

~

Dick Cash used to sing a song called *You've Changed*. It's such a good tune that Don Doane has probably recorded it. Don't we all change? Wouldn't it be terrible if we didn't? I have the same eyes that I had when I was in the first grade but isn't it interesting that they don't see things the way they did in 1941? You have heard me say on too many occasions that I was a single man between the ages of thirty-four and fifty-four. For twenty years, those years when most men are building equity while enjoying a happy and comfortable hearth and home, life for me was a constant daily struggle—to keep from becoming involved in a meaningful relationship. But for seventeen or so years now, my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, has been a part of my existence and I would not have it any other way. The other day I got to thinking how impossibly difficult it would be, starting over out there again, all alone in the hard, cold world. In case you haven't been paying attention lately, nowadays most of the available nice looking young girls have children who are thirty-five years old.

~

One of Marsha's grandchildren was under my care for an hour. I was scared. The child Avalane cannot talk. What could I do if she wanted something and how would I know what she wanted. But I learned something from this unique experience. The child went into my library, peeled the dust jackets off some Art In America books and ate them. I couldn't believe it. The child ate paper. How, I wondered, could any child cultivate a taste for paper? But then I remembered that earlier in the day I'd seen her parents feed her an avocado.

~

This morning my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, received a phone call from an exhausted daughter who had worked days and then watched a sick child nights for a week. She asked for relief so she could collapse.

For the first fifteen years of my life, I lived with my grandmother in my grandmother's house. Although my father, who came there as a boarder married his landlady's daughter and lived there for another fifty years, it was still Grammy's house until she died. I didn't know it then, but I now strongly suspect that the place operated under my grandmother's rules and regulations.

Nowadays, too few households enjoy the advantages of three generations in one home. A built in Grammy was probably the reason I was reading well above grade level when I started school. Only a working mother, who has also stood nightly watches over a sick one-year-old for a week, can really appreciate what it would mean to have a resident Grammy. For kids, life couldn't be better. In the cellar way are metal tins full of hard molasses cookies and donuts, and Grammies are more forgiving than parents when one has committed crimes against the establishment. Today I suspect that my father probably didn't have much to say about anything in our very happy household and I am indebted to him for teaching me how to play the role of Man of the House. I simply stand back and get out of the way.

~

I'd like to pass along a bit of arcane wisdom that came to me in a flash this morning as I was getting ready to do some carpenter work around the farm. No man who has ever watched how his wife put on her bra has ever had trouble tying the strings on his nail apron.

~

Matter is neither created nor destroyed and the same thing is true of the space in your barn. This week I sold two 1924ish Model TT trucks, not because I didn't need them desperately, but because I no longer had a place to store them. I've had these beautiful antique trucks since 1953 and when I put up a for sale sign two years ago, it was painful.

If you ever kept in your barn an item that you didn't use on a daily basis, you know that it very slowly disappeared from sight. Which is why it took me two years to get pictures of these valuable antiques on my web page—I had to excavate them, probably in the same manner that Howard Carter stripped away the eons of debris that covered King Tut's Tomb. And then you know what happens when you finally get around to putting on line an extravagant web page with beautiful pictures of a rare and exotic item you've had for sale for two years—you sell it the same day

from an ad you had run in Uncle Henry's. So I took the page down the same day I put it up.

You can't believe how much I enjoyed seeing all that empty space in my barn—of course I'd forgotten that I'd piled all the stuff that was on the Model TTs outside and that I was either going to have to load it on my pickup and take it to the dump or else lug it back in and now that there was nothing to stack it on, where was I going to put it?

My brother Jim came by and noticed that I'd cleaned out my barn. I told him that I'd already gone to the dump with a whole truckload of scrap lumber. You know, those little boards eight or ten inches long that will certainly come in handy some day. I told my brother that things have changed. Nowadays you don't need to save small scraps of boards because every time you go down to the dump if you swing by the wood pile you can easily pick up half a dozen planed pine boards ten inches wide and maybe two feet long. Jim agreed. He said that he no longer keeps a whole raft of lawnmower parts because any time you need parts you can go down to the dump and get a whole lawnmower.

But my barn looks good and my brother was amazed that I'd obviously been able to haul off a lot of other valuable things I'd been saving for years. I can't really take all the credit. When I went inside for a nap my wife Marsha found the keys to my pickup.

~

I have lost fifteen or so pounds this past year, simply by not eating the good things that my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, likes to make. Soft ginger snap cookies. Warm moist banana bread that melts in your mouth. Blueberry cake all warm and crumbly. Juicy red rhubarb pies that make your jaws ache just thinking about them. For a year I have also forgone ice cream and donuts and sausage and bacon. And of course, as a result, even without getting any exercise, I have taken in my belt two notches.—And the other night—up in our bedroom—just before I slipped into my pajamas, I stood sideways to Marsha, who was already reading in bed, and I sucked in my gut as far as I could. And of course it gave me the profile of a forty-five-year old kid with a tiny thin waist and a huge massive chest. And Marsha looked up from her book and gasped,—"Wow! I need to trim your eyebrows."

~

Talking about losing weight reminds me that my doctor, Doctor Hall, has never told me that I am overweight. Probably because he knows that if he does, I'll sue. But you have seen my famous belt that I have worn every day all day on all occasions for at least twenty-five years and you know that I am two inches away from the original notch I used as a callow faced youth of forty-five. Here is my secret: Last fall I stopped eating goodies. I stopped eating Marsha's pies, cakes, little sweet breads and

soft ginger snap cookies. I stopped eating ice cream. And although I have had at least one doughnut and one of those month old apple pies that you can buy for a dollar nineteen in gas stations—it was a hyperglycemic emergency—I have abstained. Cold turkey. Begging and threats have not swayed me. No goodies anywhere anytime for any occasion. And just by cutting out goodies I have lost fifteen pounds and have been able to comfortably draw in my belt two extra notches. I would be flattered if you would notice it and call my attention to it the next time you see me. You know that I do not boast or brag and I am not doing so now. The point of this rant is that you, too, will find that there are advantages when you start to lose weight. This week, while replacing a hide-a-key under my truck, I found another hide-a-key I had lost five years ago.

~

It can be statistically proven that people come in three sizes: large, average and small. Because most of the women used in television commercials are no more than skin stretched on very small bones, the American woman has been conditioned to place herself in the large category. You can't look at a television commercial without realizing that someone is trying to make women dissatisfied with the way they look, smell or feel. This is why even the most sensible woman might be tempted to lose weight—to diet. Have you ever lived with a person who eats nothing but salad? After a week you beg them to wolf brownies or at least put enough chocolate sauce on their lettuce to make them sociable. A St. George man tells me that his wife dieted faithfully for three weeks without losing a pound. She got so cranky that he started avoiding her—he even fell asleep drinking his nightly hot chocolate in front of the TV and stayed on the couch all night. And night after night, his wife lost weight. It was two or three weeks before a doctor figured out why. The television ads for weight loss had made her so sensitive to calories that she'd been gaining half a pound every night just by smelling the hot chocolate on his breath.

~

Someone stood up at our last Grange meeting and said that eggs are now laser-etched with an expiration date and a code. This code which is printed on the eggshell traces the egg back to the Maine farm where it was packaged The process could even be refined to the point where you could tell which hen at the farm laid the egg. This quantum leap forward in recording the origin of a hen's egg is truly encouraging in a state where many good people still don't know who their own father is.

~

Last week I went into the Brandywine Museum in Chadds Ford for the first time in probably twenty-seven years. I saw pictures of Hen Teel and Forrest Wall and it is a very exciting thing to see pictures of your St.

George neighbors in a museum. Right there in the Brandywine Museum I also saw a painting of a board fence, and my brother told me that that fence still exists today as a support under John Vansorosin's compost pile. How can anyone enjoy going to a museum to look at pictures if they can't recognize Jimmy Parker's barn or Lou Robinson's manure pile?

One thing that did not escape my attention was the lack of teeth in paintings. Years ago you saw no teeth in paintings or photographs. I don't know, but I will guess it might have been because years ago people had bad teeth or no teeth. Nowadays people have good teeth so we see them in photographs. But—we do not see teeth in paintings because no one knows how to paint them—painting teeth is a skill that has never been developed. Picasso put three heads on a body, hoping that nobody would notice that he couldn't paint teeth. The best teachers cannot teach students how to paint teeth because they themselves were never taught how to paint teeth. I have it on good authority that the best art teachers will throw down a rag and have the student paint and draw it over and over for six months. This presents no problem because artists have been representing rags on canvas for years. Art teachers can critique and make suggestions when it comes to painting rags. Which reminds me that my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, recently said to me, "Dr. Ralph is coming for supper—will you please change into a different rag?" Anyway,—if you want to go down in art history as one of the great innovators, learn how to paint teeth.

~

Channel 18 on my television alerts us to upcoming programs. Very often the pictures above the list show dozens of movie stars walking on a red carpet. If you have seen what I'm talking about you know that these folks are wrapped in the weirdest threads and are flaunting the most horrendous haircuts ever seen on the planet. And when I look at them I laugh and laugh because these are the same people who claim that the wife of the Prince of Wales doesn't know how to dress.

~

How do you know when the honeymoon is over? Listen closely, my young friend because that day is approaching for you. Perhaps you think that it can never happen to you, but it will.—"Oh no, our marriage is different."—Don't kid yourself. Sooner or later it happens to everybody, and the best you can do is to hope that it will be later rather than sooner. Yes, there will come a morning when, instead of getting a warm hug and seeing the light of love glowing in her eyes, you will simply hear, "That garbage *has* to be taken out *today*."

~

My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, spent the last week in October with friends in Pennsylvania where she attended an elaborate Halloween party. Her job was to make sure that none of the guests had been close enough to the candles to set their costumes on fire. She whitened her face with clown paint and wore a sheet—which reminds me—the first thing my wife Marsha did when she got home was to go upstairs and rip the sheets off our bed. If you live with a Type A person you will understand this. Type A people don't simply do anything. They can't simply take the sheets off a bed or simply remove the sheets from the bed. They rip them off because Type A people rip and tear. So when Marsha got home she went upstairs and yanked off the bedspread. And she grabbed the blankets and slatted them aside. And I said, "Why are you changing that bed? I'm the only person who has slept in it for a week." And she grabbed them sheets said, "That's reason enough."

~

My wife Marsha has gone to Holland for a week to say goodbye to her mother in law, The Great & Powerful Oma, who has been moved into a hospice. Whenever Marsha is gone, several demanding sociological and domestic problems usually arise which I have attempted to circumvent this week by employing the very little I know about quantum mechanics. Although I don't fully understand the paradox of Schroedinger's cat, you and I have talked about it before and I have found a use for it now. The way I understand it, and I know you will correct me, the cat is in the box with a radioactive atom. If the atom decays and the Geiger counter detects an alpha particle, the hammer hits a flask of prussic acid, killing the cat. Before the observer opens the box, the cat must be in a superposition of dead and alive states. Marsha is in Holland and she has no way of opening our bedroom door, the lid on Schroedinger's box, if you will, which would enable her to learn if I made the bed every morning. So, by the way I understand quantum mechanics, our bed is both made and unmade unless Marsha looks in the door which she can't do. So, because it really makes no difference if the bed is made or not, guess what?

~

Can you say anything good about fast food? Is fast food one hundred percent bad or does it have a redeeming feature? You will have to admit, that no matter how bad something is, you can find at least one good thing to say about it, and fast food is no exception—because—they say that fast food cuts down on your sex drive. So, although most everyone in the upcoming fast food culture will be overweight, it *will* help us with the population problem.

~

The email that came this morning said that I could borrow as much as $420,000 for as little as $400 a month. Although David Mumford is not likely to nominate me for a Nobel Prize for my work in mathematics, when I divided 420,000 by 400, I got 1,050 months. And when I divided that by twelve I got 87.5 years. And because I didn't believe what I saw, I ran the figures two or three times. Even if they didn't charge you interest, it would take you 87.5 years just to pay back the principle. If you were paying 5% interest on the $420,000, the first year the interest would be in the neighborhood of $21,000, or around $1,750 a month. So if you were paying $400 a month, the first month your debt would grow by $1,350 a month and of course your debt and the amount of interest would continue to grow almost as fast as your health insurance premium. You know I am the last person you'd want to consult about anything to do with money or mathematics, so perhaps you can tell me what I'm missing here. Do you suppose that Chinese bankers are so accustomed to loaning money to our government that now they think we're suckers enough to buy into the program, too?

~

Did you see that documentary on TV about the commando who had always wanted to be a woman who became a woman? He gave up the commando business and was accepted for a job at the Library of Congress. I think this got attention from the press because when they found out he'd become a woman, the job was no longer his—or hers. If you are a man who enjoys being a man or a woman who enjoys being a woman, be thankful. From what I saw on TV it is painful to have a brain that wants to be in another body. Anyway, the man in this documentary was not only a tough commando, he was in charge of the toughest commandos—and I'm talking about the high IQ, highly-educated, tough, tough, tough James Bond or Steve Waterman type of men who go into places where nobody can go and do things that can't be done. I saw a clip of this commando being recognized for his service by the top people in our government. I also saw clips of her walking along with long hair and a dress and you would really never suspect that this quiet, well-groomed woman could, in a matter of seconds, kill six football players with her bare hands. Wouldn't you like to be peeping out from behind a car in a dark parking lot and see two punks come up to her and say, "Lady, if you don't hand over your purse we're going to take it away from you."

~

Will you take off those ragged pants so you'll look nice for dinner?" That's what my wife said. And you know just as well as I do what she meant. She meant that I should put on some pants that were not all raggedy looking. Is there anything wrong with pants or shirts that are a

bit worn? I am talking about pants and shirts that came right out of the washing machine. My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, wants me to conform to Camden or Kennebunk rich kid clothing standards when friends come for dinner, and we are talking here about the meal that is eaten at noontime. I am a very sweet and gentle person. My only comments that she might consider to be negative have to do with begging her to eat less bacon and less chocolate. Or I might beg her to stop working at midnight and come to bed. She considers her body to be no more than a disposable throw-away tool that can be used in any manner to get some job done. In other words, she is the type of employee that every employer loves. Anyway, I do appreciate everything my wife does, so wouldn't you think that she would be willing to settle for my applause and kind words? I know women who wouldn't care what their husbands wore to the dinner table, if they would only say something nice to them from time to time. I know women who would be glad to dress their husbands in rags if it would cut down on their constant complaining and gosh darn crankiness in general. Why is it that no matter how good some people have it, they are never satisfied? Why do women swap husbands? Why do men swap wives?

~

Do you have friends who can say the nicest things that actually mean just the opposite? There is a literary name for it but I've forgotten what it is. You haven't fully mastered the technique of delivering the dry double edged comment unless you can keep a straight face. Gramp Wiley's wife Gladys and Sam Collins were the two best practitioners I have ever heard. I can remember thirty or so years ago when I wanted to get married so bad that I could taste it, that I had to get a paper saying I had been abandoned by my wife as being unworthy and was legally divorced. When Sam gave me the paper, he said, "Here is your passport to happiness." And then—perhaps it was my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, who said to our next door neighbor Gladys, "My daughter is coming home from college for the weekend." Gladys, who was probably eighty at the time and had seen more than a handful of young girls, said, "Oh, that's nice. She'll be such a help to you around the house.

~

You have probably never seen any paintings by Debra Yoo. This is because, as far as I know, Debra Yoo is not famous. But then, I only recently heard of James Taylor and Jimmy Buffett, so Debra Yoo might be famous, too. Be that as it may, I met Debra Yoo at the Common Ground Fair where she thrust a postcard into my hand. On the back was a painting of an old quarry. As you know, I know nothing about art. But, don't you have to admit that if Wassily Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock had been selling stocks and bonds instead of paint on canvas they would have been indicted and locked away for fraud? To my ignorant and uned-

ucated mind, an artist is one who can reproduce on canvas something that exists in the real world. I like Bradley Hendershot's pictures. I like Barbara Ernst Pray's pictures. I like the Wyeth crowd because—even if I am unable to fathom the depths of whatever it was they were trying to say, I can at least recognize Hen Teel sitting in his kitchen and the quilts out on my clothesline. So I was shocked when Debra Yoo gave me a post card of her painting of a quarry. I said, "But Debra, This is a quarry. This isn't real art.—I can tell what it is." And Debra hung her head and said, "I'm sorry. I can't get past that."

~

Here's some wisdom from the Common Ground Fair. If you are a young husband listen closely. Although I am sixty-nine years old, I was single for fifty or so of those years, so there is still a lot that you and I have to learn about marriage. And this is what I just learned. A man almost old enough to be my father said to me, "It pays to forget some things. If you *remember* to do everything all the time, she will *expect* you to remember all the time."—Good thing I wrote that down.

~

Is it true that Medicare might soon be spending two billion dollars to buy Viagra for seniors? Because smokers are over twice as likely to become impotent as non-smokers, should non-smokers be taxed for shortcomings that smokers have chosen to inflict upon themselves? If you are an older non-smoking man, you might want join me in a letter writing campaign opposing this expensive legislation. Shouldn't we let our legislators know where we stand?

~

A friend of mine said that she took French in school until she could no longer understand what they said. She said, "They got to the plu perfect of the past participle and I dropped out." This is the problem with language instruction today. Instead of considering language to be a tool whereby a student learns to discover what's really happening in the world by reading French or Dutch newspapers, in too many instances a language class is no more than an academic exercise. Remember, there is only one sentence that you need to know in every language when you are traveling abroad: "My friend will pay."

~

Henry V, that mirror of all Christian kings, said, "Once more into the breach, dear friends." You've heard me chew this rag before, but here it is again. Can you believe that a radio friend came up to me at the Common Ground Fair and said that when he first heard my show he didn't like my accent? Wow. You can imagine that if I were inside I would have gone

right through the roof. Didn't like my accent. Do you remember what Abraham Lincoln said when someone accused him of being two-faced? He said, "If I had another face would I be wearing this one?" If I could articulate my sentiments in the manner of William F. Buckley would I be employing the phonological constructs of a hick? Here, again, is the story. My great grandparents William Williamson and Mary Farquar, came to Spruce Head, Maine from Aberdeen Scotland around 1870. I was born and raised in the home of their daughter, my grandmother. I learned to talk from a woman whose parents were born in Scotland in the 1840s. I studied English and linguistics in grad school for four years, so, having given the topic an inordinate amount critical consideration, I realize that my phonology and other significant suprasegmental phonemes could well be rooted in an orphan's home in Aberdeen and not St. George, Maine. Anyway, if you were to see me come up to a polio victim and say, "Hey, you walk funny. Why don't you quit dragging your leg behind you like that? Wouldn't you think that I was incredibly ignorant—or mentally ill—or drunk? Yet—some supposedly well educated people think nothing of coming up to someone with a speech impediment and saying, "Hey, why do you find it necessary to put on that ridiculous false Maine accent?"

~

Thank you for taking the time to say hi to me at the Common Ground Fair. I met Lillian's brother George. Lillian was the cook at Hidden Valley or one of those camps where my wife Marsha worked. I met Long Ball John's daughter. Long Ball John was a golf pro who beat Sam Snead in the rain at Gull Lake Country Club somewhere in Michigan. I met a woman who asked me what men do with their old toupees. She can't find even one. She wants to make a door mat out of toupees that says, "Don't Tread On Me." The Volvo man from Leeds told me that natural fibers are not conducive to foundation garments. And I heard the brass rat story. Did you know that there is a restaurant down Bar Harbor way where they have a sandwich called "The humble Farmer?" I was foolish enough to ask what was in it. The man kind of hemmed and hawed and looked at his feet, but his little eight-year-old daughter said, "It's full of baloney."

~

What would make a grown man stand up in a crowd of people and tell an outright falsehood about me? For three days I was in front of the MPBN tent at the Common Ground Fair and I was there from the time the fair opened until long after it had officially closed. And because Barbara and her MOFGA staff gave me such a great location, I was usually trying to talk to six or eight radio friends at the same time. And right in front of a crowd of people one man said, "humble, the last time I saw you, you were standing in front of the Trade Winds Motel in Rockland dressed in nothing but a barrel." And here I want to pause long enough to ask you—if you

can imagine me—appearing anywhere dressed in nothing but a barrel. Embarrassed me to pieces. And this man said, "You were standing in front of the Trade Winds Motel in Rockland dressed in nothing but a barrel. Had ropes going up over your shoulders holding up the barrel. You were protesting a male strip show that they were having in there that night. You said that anyone who saw your body would realize that a male strip show was demeaning to men."

~

Big Dave, who runs a land clearing business in Fort Myers, Florida, came by for supper at our home in St. George, Maine the other night. Marsha was delighted to see him because Marsha loves to cook and Big Dave has to constantly apply himself to sustain his 250 plus pounds.

Big Dave is a great story teller. Big Dave said that he was walking down some rickety wooden steps when the bottom one broke and he fell and rolled on the ground. The owner of the building, who was watching, almost had a heart attack—when Big Dave's brother pulled out his cell phone and said, "Hello, Bornstein, Bornstein, and Bornstein?"

~

My friend Rich who was with—I think it was the National Restaurant Association – was right in there with people who put on big programs. Rich told me about a program someone once put on in Chicago for 20,000 people. It was the biggest sit down dining room in the country and President Nixon was going to come in and say a few words to the restaurant people—probably about eating crow. It was such a big deal that they'd brought in a famous band—let's call it the Franz Bentler Orchestra—and Franz was going to bring down his baton on *Hail to The Chief* when Nixon approached the entrance to the hall. The fellow who hired Franz wanted to leave nothing to chance so he, himself, was going to stand in the doorway and when he saw President Nixon coming he was going to take out his handkerchief and wave it over his head so Franz could play *Hail to the Chief*—so Franz had better be watching. So the boss is standing in the doorway when a friend comes up to him and starts to chat—like you would with a friend. And he says, "Who is that bandleader way down there who is watching us so closely?" And the boss says, "That's Franz Bentler." And this guy says, "Oh, I know Franz Bentler, and he takes out his handkerchief and waves it over his head."

~

My friend Rich has a daughter who worked in the Peace Corps in the Ivory Coast. She was in a village of 700 people and taught young people basic health procedures, the most important of which could not be taught in American schools today. She was the first white person that many of them had ever seen, and forty or so of her new students were proud to

pose with her in a group picture. It was printed in her home town newspaper in Illinois. Her father cut out the picture and saved it—not so much for the picture but for the caption the editor put underneath it, which read: "Anne Gavin. Second row. Third from right.

~

You have heard me say many many times that I read Harlequin Romances in seven languages. Because Harlequins are written for people with a grade school vocabulary they are ideal reading for beginners trying to learn another language. You have heard me say that some of them are funny and contain nothing that you would be ashamed to have your grandmother or granddaughter read. I have yet to find one that was not full of instruction for the reflective mind. Ecutay: while reading one in Dutch at 5:30 this morning I realized that although it helped me maintain my linguistic skills, the plot—the story—was just the opposite of what one finds in real life. In Harlequin Romances we find two beautiful, perfect people who want to live together, but some silly, unspoken reason keeps them apart. In real life two beautiful people would like to escape a tedious, uneventful marriage, but some silly unspoken reason keeps *them* together.

~

People from away don't understand how we do things here in Maine. I have fifty or so rhubarb plants. I used to give away a lot of rhubarb. But my friends didn't want to take it when I said it was free, so I started snapping a rubber band around a handful of it and putting it on a chrome plated farm stand out by the road. You get it by the bunch, because if I ever put it out by the pound, even though it might be eight ounces over, there would come a day when someone would howl that it was one ounce short. But a bunch is a bunch.

One day, a man from away was watching me snap it off, cut off the huge leaf, and put the stalk on the five by five inch top of an ancient blue spring scale that I carry down to the rhubarb patch. Every once in a while I'd snatch it up, snap a rubber band around it and throw the bunch aside. The man watching said, "That scale don't work." Of course it works. When I can't get no more on the top of the scale and it starts to fall off, you've got a bunch.

~

Here's your humble Farmer Mr. Nasty story for the week. You know that there are devious people out there. We are talking here about ruthless men and women who will stop at nothing to get what they want. The law isn't even a slight inconvenience to them. They will have their way in their neighborhood, no matter what. Listen closely and tell me if I am talking about your neighbor. A man built a beautiful house by the ocean.

But—although he was as close to the ocean as zoning ordinances would permit, his view was blocked by a vast impenetrable forest. Big trees. Lots of big trees. No amount of pleading with the planning board would get him a permit to cut one ant infested fir. But the man who owns this house has a wife who wants to see the ocean and zoning be damned, he'd better do something about it. Oh, I can barely bring myself to tell you what he did. Get the kids away from the radio. It's too horrible. This man rented a u-haul truck and came home the same night with 2,000 feet of wire fence and three goats.

~

If your father were Prime Minister of England or if your mother earned a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize, you must live a hard life. Are you crushed by unnecessary social pressures? Do folks expect you to measure up? My father came to this country to break big pieces of rock into smaller paving blocks. He pounded granite in a quarry all day just like Rambo, so even when I joined the ranks of the lowest paid teachers in the country, my neighbors might have chosen to believe that I did better than my father.

But even though my friend Grayson is the Chief Financial Officer in a corporation, his father has a PhD from Harvard. He writes books and Grayson's mother is a lawyer. So unless Grayson absconds with hundreds of millions of dollars and lives the rest of his luxurious days surrounded by dancing girls in Aruba, it is going to be hard to come up to the expectations of his parents.

Grayson confided to me that he finds his father exceptionally annoying when the three of them play cards. His mother, the lawyer, snaps her cards crisply into her hand, snap snap snap. She plays close to the waist and thinks way ahead. On the other hand, his father, the scholar, fumbles with his cards. He drops them on the floor. He never seems to know what he is holding. He makes blunder after blunder. It takes him forever to evaluate his hand and his indecision drives his son and wife crazy. The worst part is that he always wins.

~

You have heard me speak of young Grayson Allen. Grayson Allen got an award for having the best newspaper at Dartmouth college. The powers immediately withdrew the paper's funding and it folded. Grayson Allen got several years experience in the banking business and is now the Chief Financial Officer in some small corporation. His world is far removed from mine and I asked him exactly what a Chief Financial Officer does. He said, "If anyone in the company messes up, we're the ones who go to jail."

~

I heard it again on the morning news. They said we now have an airplane almost the size of a football field. It is interesting that the football field is accepted as a unit of measure by many Americans. Always eager to join the cognoscenti, I Googled "size of football field" this morning and learned that the total field is 120 yards long and 160 feet wide. That's what it said. "120 *yards* long and 160 *feet* wide." So I learned two things today—the size of a football field and the fact that people who are not academics are likely to mix their—measurephors.

~

I heard it on the noon news. "As more and more of our college graduates move out of state, business owners in Maine are wondering what they can do to keep their work force." Here's a simple answer that no business owner in Maine has ever considered. Pay—them—more—money.

~

One of my schoolmates from Gorham Normal School called up the other day and in the course of the conversation said that his stepson was going to Castine, which made the old man feel very good. But, the kid has met a girl with a lobster license and of course this is not good because he wants the kid to get an education. But he knows that the kid can make from $250,000 to $300,000 a year lobstering, and if you can do that why bother to work your fingers to the bone at Castine for four years.

You know as well as I do that girlfriends and even wives are cast aside —even quicker than I can wear out a shirt—so I said that perhaps this was just a summer romance type of thing. But my friend said that he had reason to believe that it was serious. His stepson had built her a new bait tank and he measured her height so she wouldn't have to hurt her back while leaning over to fill bait bags.

~

I just heard that thinking is modeled as statistical inference rather than logic, and learning results from the accumulation of massive data from interactions with the world. I only mention this because there are learned people who listen to this radio program. They are professors of linguistics, psychology, English, statistics and law, to mention only a few. During the summer months one or two super special grad students of these learned professors might get invited to Maine for a few days—you know—to tighten up the thesis. Surprisingly enough, some of these students *do not* have affairs with their professors and then become number two out of an eventual string of five, six or even eight graduate student spouses. They are serious scholars who would, however, do *almost* anything for their mentors. Were you to read the memoirs of one of them fifty years

from now, you might see something like this: "My most uplifting experience while studying geometric invariant theory?—Digging a new hole for David Mumford's privy."

~

It wasn't too long ago that I went into a bookstore in Camden just in time to see a man buy a book written in Greek. I thought that was pretty unusual and I said so. Not many people around who can read Greek. But it reminded me of something and I said to this man, "This morning when I got out of bed I noticed on the little stand beside my bed a book in Swedish, a book in Spanish, a book in Dutch and a book in French." The man said, "For heaven sake—who were you sleeping with?"

~

Have you ever heard of an adult who didn't mind growing older, slower and more forgetful? You might have seen the one who grabbed headlines in the paper last week when he crashed his small plane. The sheriff found a very large amount of cash scattered around the crash site but the poor old pilot couldn't remember where he got the money or what he was going to do with it. The drug enforcement administration and the income tax people have been looking into the situation. The most reasonable explanation anyone has come up with so far, is that he was on his way to Lewiston to make his monthly health insurance payment.

~

This afternoon I was shocked—no, I was horrified when I looked into the wash basin and saw half a dozen hairs in there about three inches long.—I'd just finished washing my feet.

~ Yet More Rants ~

At eight o'clock this morning, while drinking my hot water and honey, I watched a television advertisement for an air cleaner. You will believe me when I tell you that, unless I wanted to watch a turkey with its head shot off flop around on the ground, it was the most interesting thing on.

The man took the filter out of his air purifier and placed it in a clear fishbowl. He then poured water over it. This cleaned the filter and washed the impurities into the water, which turned black. Then, he very dramatically dipped up a water glass full of the black water and asked the anemic blonde, who had, by the way, been watching this operation, if she'd like to drink the water. "No, no." Would you want your *children* drinking this water? "No, no." Well, if you wouldn't want them *drinking* this dirt and filth, why do you permit them to *breathe* this dirt and filth? I was shaking my head and laughing as I rushed to my computer to take notes so I didn't watch the rest of the commercial. If you want, tell us how it ends.

I don't know when you last drove across fifteen or twenty states, but I've done it within the past month and have seen the gray haze that covers much of our country. The people who live in this haze take it for granted. Living in much of Florida is like camping in the middle of a smoldering dump of green palm trees. When land is cleared to make room for new houses and shopping centers it is cheaper to burn the brush than to chip it. Floridians and snow birds alike will tell you they don't notice the smoke. It is part of retirement and the good life.

You have heard that problems are really opportunities. Are you surprised that instead of figuring out how to eliminate the source of this problematic poison, opportunistic Americans market a machine that will suck it out of the air in your kid's bedroom?

Yes, I admire the man *and* his machine. But what happens when your kid gets big enough to play outside?

~

What are the chances that your insurance rates will drop on your house or your car next year? What are the chances that your town would be able to have its own insurance company? Have you ever thought what would happen if everyone in town were to pay in $100 a year in to your town's private insurance company? Then, if a family had a fire or an accident, that should pretty well take care of it, wouldn't it? Your town might even build up a surplus in the account so that the interest or dividends would take care of everyone's needs without even paying in any more. Free insurance.

I saw part of the *Godfather* the other night and I remember that they were concerned that there was no money coming in because of the gang war. And with no cash flow there was no way they could pay off the judges and police and politicians and newspaper editors.

Why do you suppose you don't stand a chance when it comes to enacting legislation that would let towns have their own insurance companies? I just read that the National Association of Insurance Commissioners has an annual budget of around $100,000,000. They have a staff of around 360 people. Where do you suppose they get that $100,000,000 that they spend every year to make sure that they can dig even deeper in your pocket?

~

Chuck Shepherd advertises *The News of the Weird* as a weekly chronicle of the continuing decline of civilization. It is my understanding that he is being put out of business by the evening news. Jon over in Stratham NH sent me a newspaper called *Wire*, and in *Wire* I read, for the first time in a couple of years, Chuck Shepherd's *News of The Weird*. One of the articles was about a guy who was still in jail even though DNA had now proven that he was innocent. So I Googled that prisoner, just like you do when you want to know about anything, and I found a web page with a list of people who had been found innocent by DNA and released after years and years in jail. And other people who had been found innocent by DNA who are still in jail.

Interesting thing, isn't it. You can be innocent, have a fair trial, and still end up in jail. But, hey, we all make mistakes.

~

A recent food study from Sweden says that French fries, potato chips and some kinds of cereal are not good for you. I wouldn't have believed that had not a representative of the grocery industry immediately denied it.

~

I have in my hand the book *2,201 Fascinating Facts*. I read in this book that the Eskimos have twenty words for snow, which you know is a lie. It also says that more that a million dollars belonging to Adolf Hitler and other prominent Nazis is still unclaimed in American Banks and that no one knows what to do with it today. But wait. Don't be surprised if you get a letter from Nigeria next week asking if you will stand in as next of kin.

~

What is bravery? What is patriotism? Do their definitions change from year to year? Are you brave if you suddenly jump into some volatile situation and save somebody? You might argue that if you didn't have time to think about it, it's not bravery.

Are you brave if you are forced to engage in a senseless and dangerous endeavor? You might point out that the really brave are those with the courage to walk away from meaningless life-threatening situations.

Do you admire brave men? Hitler was decorated for bravery four times. No one can deny that he was a patriot.

And how does one define patriotism today? You've read Carl Sandburg's book about Abraham Lincoln's war years. You will recall that an old rowdy said to the President, "I feel patriotic." Lincoln said, "What do you mean by feeling patriotic?" "Why, I feel as if I wanted to kill somebody or steal something."

~

You probably didn't know that Sophocles was the son of a sword manufacturer. So the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars which impoverished almost everybody left Sophocles with a comfortable income. Is it not worth noting that 468 BC might have been the last time a war ever benefited anyone who wanted funding for the arts?

~

Anyone who lives in Maine knows that there are two basic schools of thought when it comes to putting on your sweater. You can either hang onto your shirt cuffs or you can let the sweater drag them way up over your elbows. Every morning when I put on my sweater I am faced with this ubiquitous metaphysical problem. Should I cast my lot with the cuff holders or should I join those who don't mind their shirt cuffs pulled up above the elbow. The reason I have never taken a stand might suggest to an unbiased observer that one way is no better than the other. The difference between the philosophies is so meaningless and insignificant, I'm surprised the two camps have never gone to war.

~

The other day while thinking about guns I looked up the Second Amendment. It says, "*A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.*" I'm not a Supreme Court Justice, but I think that means we can keep guns in case we need to serve in the militia. And I interpret serve in the militia to mean a license to shoot folks from away who swagger into St. George and try to impose their form of government on me.

How do you feel about that? Do Maine people still need guns in their homes, loaded and ready to repel invaders? Of course you will remember that when Hitler went into Poland and Denmark and Holland, all those young boys, his troops if you will, didn't think of themselves as invaders —Hitler's young boys had been raised and trained to believe that they were liberating forces. Like almost every invading army that has ever walked the planet, their job was to get those shoulders back and get in there and free those poor oppressed people.

During the early 1940s a very common word was "propaganda." I heard it all the time. I didn't know what propaganda meant, but I knew that it had something to do with the war. Any adult who has read a comprehensive history book realizes that propaganda is an integral component of all wars.

So—you don't have to read too many history books before you realize that any foreign troops marching into St. George would have been told, long before they left home, that they were liberating forces. That's the way these things have to work. If young boys can't be convinced that they are an important part of a noble cause in a far away land, seeing a few friends picked off while swimming butt-naked in the Long Cove quarry might discourage a few of the brighter ones. Even those who came here seeking cultural enrichment might think of a more congenial place to find it. Imagine how surprised all those innocent young boys would be, arriving here, expecting a warm welcome by the general populace once they freed us from our oppressive town manager and wicked governor, only to find so many of us sniping away at them from behind every stone wall and tree. In their young one-track minds, it naturally follows that anyone who doesn't welcome them must be a fanatical insurgent who has to be hunted down and shot like a rat. They weren't told that The Second Amendment gives us the right to defend our families, our homes, our way of life and that we will jolly well do it. They are young. They can't realize that no matter how bad things might be here, we really don't appreciate liberators from away who kill our friends and family while shooting their way into town with a promise to set us free.

I've been thinking about this for weeks, and I must admit that if St. George were occupied by foreign troops, I'd hesitate to break out the glass with my gun barrel and shoot at them from my living room window.

They only do that in cowboy movies. When the Concord patriots shot at the British soldiers from their homes, the soldiers went inside and put all the men to death. I've learned from history, so I'd be more likely to sit around a smoldering fire out in the woods, eating horse meat with my neighbors, while figuring out how to pick them off one at a time.

My high school history teacher, Mr. Hunnewell, used to say, "No doubt about it." No doubt about it: Blasting away at unwanted occupying forces from behind stone walls and trees is a time honored American tradition, established by our gritty ancestors who didn't like being bullied. Yes, there might have a been a few wimps or moderates who initially didn't care if it went one way or the other, but every time the British killed another fanatical patriot, a dozen or so of his indifferent friends were nudged over the line and reached for their muskets.

Now that all the smoke and dust has settled, everyone agrees that King George III wasn't all that clever. The only prudent thing he did for the British was to hire Hessian soldiers to take some of the fire.

~ The humble Farmer's Fields & Gardens ~

My friend Dave claims to be the only man in Aroostook County to get his head caught in a hydraulic potato barrel hoist.

~

What can you tell by TV ratings? The way I understand it, some company calls around and asks a certain percentage of the population what they are watching on TV at any given time. I can't stand game shows, shows where there is inexplicable canned laughter after every sentence, shows where big animals eat little animals, exercise machine demos and shows where they are selling something. I also click to another channel or put on the mute button when any commercial comes on—and that even goes for my car radio. I hear, "You are listening to..." and click, they're history. Well, from what I've said, you know that the only thing that I haven't excluded is *Keeping up Appearances*, *Cops*, and *Jerry Springer*. And if I wasn't always studying half a dozen languages, I wouldn't know what to do with my spare time. But I started out talking about TV ratings. My friend Dave told me that he used to have a TV show that got the highest ratings of any show in his time slot. Wow. I'm still impressed. It was a cable show in Aroostook County that ran from four until six every morning.

~

According to the date on a Root catalog in my box of bee supplies, I haven't kept bees since 1980. I ordered two swarms from Bob Egan, the Skowhegan, Maine bee man whom you have met at the Common Ground Fair, and then discovered that my hives were rotted out. When I measured them, one was one-eigth of an inch larger than the other, so I went on line to find out how big the hive should be. Guess what. I discovered that in other countries they have a different type of hive that is much less

expensive. And it looks like just what I want. Anyone who has four hundred hives might want standardized hives, but for just one hive for my apple trees and blueberries, this other simple bee hive looks like just the thing. Unfortunately, the directions for building this bee hive seem to be written for someone who already knows how to do it. Lot of little important steps in there that are not explained. I wrote to a man—I think he is in Africa—to thank him for the information he had posted on line. He wrote back, "Be sure to feed the bees all they want while they're drawing out the comb during your honey flow while brood rearing is going on." — which I thought was very nice of him. But how do I feed the bees? How do I know when they have all they want? What is drawing out the comb and how do I know when they are doing it? What is the honey flow and how do I know when that is taking place? What is brood rearing and how do I know when that is going on? The reason I can't do anything practical or understand simple written instructions today might be traced back to the fact that I went to college until I was thirty-four years old. In graduate school I was able to escape the difficult practical realities of the real world, because as a linguist I was attempting to ascertain if there is a one to one correlation between acoustic and articulatory parameters, which is so much simpler.

~

Leila Percy asked me to ride on George Sprowl's truck and play in the Searsmont parade. Chris Rogers was on drums and Muriel, the Midcoast Monster, was playing piano. It was an unusually nice sunny day and after seven times through God Bless America, Muriel and I had worked out four different variations on the changes that would even have impressed Don Doane. Before climbing up on the truck I talked with one old man who couldn't wait for the parade to start. He said he was anxious to see the twenty or thirty of those little four wheeled motorcycles they call all terrain vehicles. I couldn't believe that an old man would be interested in anything like that, until he said, "I'm looking for the kid who ruined my field in mud season."

~

From time to time something happens to an ordinary, everyday person that is so extraordinary that it warrants commentary. You are about to hear of one those things. You're right. Strange and unbelievable things might happen *more* than we know, because the person to whom it happens knows better than to blab it round—because people might think he is either crazy or lying. But, because my reputation has already been established, and because we've been friends for many years, I'm simply going to ask you to listen closely.

Down in the cellar, next to wooden shelves filled with dozens of Ball canning jars that nobody will ever use, and half filled cans of paint that

were there when I bought the place from one of mother's third cousins in 1970, there is a rubber boot. I can't remember when that rubber boot wasn't there. It is covered with dust from the many loads of wood that were dumped in the cellar in October to be burned through the cold winter months. Some of the dust got on the boot when Steve Dennison dug the new eight-foot cellar that is under our new bed and breakfast room on back of the house. It is not a remarkable boot except for the fact that the rubber in it has not rotted out. It is a pliable and sound boot whose mate, back in the forgotten mists of time, must have either been slopped with gasoline or torn beyond repair.

Now, I can't throw away both boots if only one gets destroyed. Can you? If you were to ask my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, she would tell you that I can't throw away anything. But, when I'm not looking, things like my favorite shirts are very likely to disappear. And when I ask where they are she says they've gone to shirt heaven. So I knew that the boot was there, in the cellar. I couldn't forget it, because for years I have looked at it every time I've gone down cellar to take a shower.

OK. With years of history now firmly entrenched in your mind, let's now fast forward to this morning. I was slogging through a wet part out in my woods putting up cow fence when my sock felt soggy. One of my boots, which I had probably bought at a lawn sale for two dollars, had rotted out right above the arch where it bends when you step. It could be patched but I knew I had another good boot down in the cellar. Not to worry. Now comes the part that you might not believe. When I went down in the cellar to get that boot, not only was it still there, but it was the one I needed.

~

I was telling my brother that my cows got out twice last week because I didn't have my fence up right. I was hoping they wouldn't notice a little one hundred foot strip down by the woods with no wire. And he told me that a man who lived here in St. George 200 or so years ago had a cow that got out and ate all his neighbor's cabbages. And the neighbor said, "Your cow just ate all my cabbages." And the man said, "Have you ever known of a cabbage to hurt a cow?"

~

A long time radio friend sent me a letter the other day. Although he said a lot of things, what it amounted to was that he liked to hear me tell about the stupid things I do every day but he didn't like me to get too heavy into social issues because what I said and the way I said it made sense and he didn't want to believe it. So instead of moral or social issues my topic today will be cow fence. When the grass gets short in the pasture, cows like to get out of the pasture because the grass really is greener and more plentiful on the other side. Yes, there are nutrients there, but cows are

lazy and don't like to work any more than they have to. And when there is only a fourteen gauge wire between 1,000 pounds of hungry animal and your neighbor's garden, you'd better make sure that that wire will bite. I suck on a straw and lay it on the wire two inches from my fingers. I move the wet straw closer until I feel zap. How do you do it?

This afternoon I could even hold the wire and there was no zap. So I put on my boots and gloves and my bee keepers face screen to keep out the black flies, I unplugged the clicker, and right where the wire comes out of the barn, I started to walk the fence. It is a long fence which runs along stone walls and through the woods and through a swamp. And when it goes around the spring pond where the cows get their water it runs up toward the road and across by my asparagus plants and the apple trees and behind the hen house and back to the place where I started. And even with gloves and the bee keepers bonnet the mosquitoes were biting through my shirt all the way. And I was sweating because I'd been lopping off ferns and twigs with pruning shears. I plugged in the clicker and walked back out to the fence. And still no zap. So I dug around until I found a little electrical tool. It has a light on one end and two wires on the other end and I thought it might work on an electric shock fence just like it does on regular electricity so I tried it on the clicker and the little light flashed. The next step was to try it right outside of the barn where the sheathed wire from the clicker hooks on to the 14 gauge fence wire. And when I went outside of the window where it comes out of the barn, it was going zap zap zap and fire was flying every time because there wasn't a good connection between the sheathed wire and the electric fence wire. I had walked the entire fence line looking for the problem while getting bit by mosquitoes.

But it wasn't for nothing because there is a moral to this story and if you are over sixty years of age you already know what it is. Anytime there is anything wrong with your farm or your marriage or your business, the sooner you look close to home the sooner you'll find the trouble.

~

Bill is a consummate expert in the field of bovine midwifery and it's a good thing because he heard a cow that was obviously having trouble dropping a calf. He got a piece of rope and ran out to help, but the first thing he noticed was that the calf had breached. He tried to turn the calf around but couldn't. So he grabbed the calf's hind legs and pulled. Just then a young woman from New Jersey who'd been up on the hill working on a pastoral watercolor came down to see what's going on. She gets there just in time to see Bill bring that calf into the world. And she says, "I can't believe that. How fast was that little one going when it hit the big one?"

~

You'll see me over at the Owl's Head Transportation Museum's huge parking lot just about every other Saturday from spring until fall. I spoke to Warren Kincaid at the car show. Warren is a Model T expert and when you are an expert in anything, you collect tons and tons of good and valuable things that enable you to ply your trade. Warren says that he is at the stage in his career where he would like to get into his barn. Of course he can't, because it is piled with good and valuable things. How do you throw away the rear fender to a 1913 model T when you know that the day after you do, you'll need it? I also have several Model T Fords and several tons of parts that I bought over fifty years ago, so I can identify with the problem.

What I learned from Warren is that the inability to discard useless items is probably genetic. I already knew that it is easier to clean out someone else's barn than your own. Warren says that his eighty-three year old father epitomizes the Maine collector. Listen to what happened when Warren tried to clean out his father's barn.

"Father had over two hundred oil cans in his barn. My father says, 'Let me tell you what I was going to do with those cans. I was going to cut out all the ends and weld them together like a honey comb and put nuts and bolts in them.' Then," Warren says, "I tried to throw away a three foot length of that cardboard tubing they call sona tube. You put it in the ground and pour concrete into it to make footings. Father said, 'Let me tell you what I was going to do with that. I was going to put a clothes line post out in the yard for your mother.'" And Warren said, "Dad, mother has been dead for twenty-two years."

~

If you attended the Common Ground Fair, you might have seen, in a tent, a huge table covered with books. One of the books was titled: *How To Build A Barn*. Would you be surprised if the first sentence on the first page said, "It ain't going to be big enough." The Common Ground Fair is a place where you often meet friends for the first time. What an opportunity for a weak-eyed old man to make a fool of himself. I almost said to one girl, "I like that big diamond on the side of your nose."

~

You have seen the extra pockets on my pants. You know that there is a little black notebook in one of those pockets so I can write down things that I hear or see—just for you. Sometimes friends want to tell me a story. One day Blackie knocked on the window of my truck. I screwed down the window and he said, "Do you know how cold it was down at my house this morning?" And I said, "No, how cold was it down your house this morn-

ing?" And he said, "It was so cold I saw a rooster going across the road with a cape on."

~

My friend lawyer Crandall told me about a woman up in the County who went in one of those little markets and said, "I want something good for dinner. What have you got?" And the butcher said, "Tongue is good today." And the woman said, "Nyaa, tongue? I wouldn't eat anything that came out of a cow's mouth. Give me a dozen eggs."

~

Did you get up to the Agricultural Trade Show in Augusta last week? Even though the roads were bad, I went up and who should I meet but my friend, David Bright, who used to write the agricultural column for the *Bangor Daily News*. For the past few years David has run around the country installing computer systems in newspaper offices. But he heard that they are looking for a new Commissioner of Agriculture so he applied. I don't know if he stands much of a chance because he's one of the five smartest men I know. He would be the kind of commissioner who would be right out there in your blueberries or in your cow barn finding out what he could do for you, but you probably know they very often get someone from away who looks good in a suit to be commissioners, because Maine people aren't smart enough.

Anyway, David was telling about going to work for the *Bangor Daily news* before he graduated from the University of Maine. He went back later and got the few credits he needed to graduate. But you had to be present at graduation to get your degree, so he went in and told the Dean that he had to work and couldn't be at the graduation. Well, the Dean gave him a paper that excused him. But when David went in to the paper and asked the boss what he wanted him to do, the boss said, "Why don't you go up to Orono and cover the graduation ceremony."

~

A neighbor called me last week and asked if I had any alders he could have. It seems that the government is rebuilding a so-called wetlands area, they believe it is necessary to replant it with alders, and my friend has the contract.

He said they had to be about eighteen inches high. I said, "Plant the roots and within a year they'll be three feet high."

He said that the specifications called for eighteen-inch alders.

Have you ever heard of such a thing? Anyone who knows anything at all about alders knows that once alder roots get in the ground, it takes three or four years of yearly mowing to kill them. And if you have an

environment where alders can grow, they'll be in there soon enough without planting.

Did you know that big money is now being spent to plant alders? In Maine, alders growing on a farm is the mark of a lazy, incompetent farmer. Nothing marks you as being lower class like alders growing on your property. And now the government wants to plant them to restore an area.

Suppose killer bees had been wiped out of a swamp in Maine by some ecological disaster. Would the government spend money to buy some in Mexico and truck them in? Suppose all the thistles were suddenly wiped out of Kansas. Would wheat farmers want the government to plant replacements?

If you can find the newspaper clipping that tells about planting alders in Maine, I suggest you clip it out and sent it in to Readers' Digest. They pay money for news of strange, impractical or weird things that they can republish.

~

Ten years ago some people who had just moved into Gouldsboro complained about the smell from their neighbor's cows. So they sold their cows. Now the people from away are complaining that Gouldsboro's not rural anymore.

~

Bob Crowe asked me if I knew anything about wetlands. I told him I wouldn't know a wetland if I saw one. Bob says that if you have to watch where you step, it's probably wetlands. But then I got to thinking that you have to walk through my pasture the same way.

~ The Blue Hill Fair ~

I seldom brag, but my house smells like garbage.

For years Gramp Wiley has claimed that a fly would starve to death in my pantry. Like most old bachelors, I don't eat at home—unless you count rolled oats and spaghetti.

But my Boston friends, Richard and Yara, were roughing it here over Labor Day. And because they'd seen my cupboard before, they knew that if they wanted to eat they'd have to bring food.

Now Richard and his wife are gone, but their exotic Boston garbage is still here, hanging from a pantry doorknob in one of those big plastic bags that city people use as garbage can liners. They brought that, too, as I've never needed plastic liners or a garbage can.

For years, if I ever had a piece of trash that would burn, I'd stuff it in the stove. And on those rare occasions when I had something left on my plate, I'd throw it off the back porch. By morning the food was always gone. My brother, Jim, says I wouldn't dare do it if I could see what I was feeding in the night.

But now those little flies that grow on old fruit are multiplying and I'm savoring the ambiance of affluence—old coffee grounds, spices that would bug out the eyes of a coyote, and chicken bones.

Oh, it's different from that undusted old-house smell I've lived in for years, although I have enjoyed the sweet, sticky smell of grafting wax every day since my annual lobster picnic. This is why. A week before, the drain pipe fell off my sink and I asked Gootch, always an early arrival, if he'd put it back together as I hadn't had time to do more than pick up a new nut for it at the hardware store.

Gootch hails from Newry, which disappeared from the map one night when a loaded logging truck rolled over on it.

Coming from Newry, Gootch knows how to make do. When he found the nut I'd bought at the store didn't fit the sink, he stuck the pipe together with some beeswax he found. It seemed to work great.

But get beeswax hot enough and it runs, like honey. So twice every day, as I pour my gallon of boiling spaghetti water down the sink, I smell newly grafted apple trees as the wax melts around the pipe.

So at summer's end I find myself in a fresh, invigorating atmosphere so necessary for the creative work in which I am engaged.

Which brings me to Labor Day and the Blue Hill Fair.

My name was on the program for 4PM and Marie Osmond was scheduled for 6PM. This was fine with me. Although I'm still not exactly sure what Marie Osmond does, I did know she was famous for something and was very likely to draw a good crowd.

Although you've probably attended the Blue Hill Fair, I'd like to give you my impressions of it. There wasn't a native there who couldn't have climbed on a stage and held a crowd for an hour with simple observations on the weather.

I saw farm machinery and draft horses and oxen. They had lobster rolls that would even compare with the famous crabmeat rolls up at Ed Perry's Sunoco Station in Stockton Springs. There was a crowded grandstand and a racetrack with horses pulling little one-axle buggies. And on the inside of the racetrack, not quite abeam of the grandstand, was a stage, which supported an authentic country and western band from South Boston.

People in the grandstand had to lean to the left to see the stage and every time the horses trotted by there were a few seconds when one couldn't see anything at all for the dust. But the sound system was real good so even when you couldn't see the band you knew they were still there.

Dwight Webber, the boss, had filled me up with a lobster roll and a can of Moxie so he knew I was ready when we climbed on the stage at 4PM.

But Marie Osmond's crew was already unloading equipment for her show and someone suggested that I give my little talk from a small tower that stood beside the stage. Dwight and I agreed that that was reasonable so I climbed up there and began.

Telling stories to an audience that is on the other side of a racetrack is not the most intimate of experiences. The sound system was excellent, but they could only see me from the waist up, like a hand puppet bobbing about in a tiny tower waiting for someone to shout, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair."

It was a great show. Several large vans pulled onto the racetrack and fifteen sweating, dusty men built a huge stage between me and my audience as I jabbered on.

Dwight agrees that we'll never do it like that again. Next year he says he'll put me on a real good stage—and then have it torn down around me.

~ Biological Determinism ~

Why can Tony Frankowski lovingly pat one of his cows and say, "Robert, this one's a milk factory," when another cow might not give half as much milk? Why are some horses so big that the only work they can find is hauling a beer truck for TV commercials, while others with long, skinny legs have all they can do to bear up an eighty-pound rider as they chase a fox?

For years scientists thought that creatures that breathed and walked on legs were likely to perpetuate their own kind. For example, a cow with long horns was very likely to have offspring with long horns. A man smart enough to lift himself out of poverty was likely to have a son capable of doing the same.

Years ago, school teachers who taught in the same town for two generations had the impression that little boys who only attended to their runny noses with their tongues would send in an exact copy twenty years later. You might teach the father to use a handkerchief, but then you'd have to teach eight or ten of his sons the same trick when they got to school—there was no environmental carry-over. Ask any teacher.

"Back in the dark ages they called that 'biological determinism,'" my psychologist friend Addler explained as he tossed aside his beanie with the propeller on the top and flopped back on his couch. "There were a lot of old sayings that went along with that primitive kind of thinking: 'Like father, like son.'"

"You can't beat manure and get whipped cream," I added eagerly.

My friend folded his hands across his waist and sighed, "All that changed when scientists made the first silk purse out of a sow's ear."

It made all the papers at the time.

For years the poor were like the rich in that they were held responsible for their own circumstances. Social scientists thought that the rich were rich because someone down the line was smart or industrious enough to earn some money and hang onto it. By the same flawed rea-

soning, they figured that the poor were poor because they weren't smart or industrious enough to earn money and keep it.

"It's unfair to judge the poor like you do the rich," I cried.

Now we know that the rich are rich because they think and look and act like rich people. They live near other rich people.

I immediately grasped Addler's meaning. My mouth dropped open as I gasped, "The poor are poor simply because they look and act so poor that we call them poor."

My psychologist friend grunted in agreement. "When you identify people as winners or losers you're labeling them—putting them in categories—writing them off. They cease to be masters of their own destinies, which restricts their human potential. But now we know that everyone has exactly the same ability."

"And simple name calling makes some of them look and act poor or rich."

Labeling is only part of it. Henry, who is a professor of education at Princeton, conducted an experiment that has settled the nature-or-nurture question for good. For years anyone involved in animal husbandry prized their breeding animals and selected them with great care. But Henry discovered that any calf raised in the same barn and pasture as one of his prize heifers was eventually able to give as much milk as one with blue-ribbon parents. Recognizing the importance of environment has revolutionized our thinking. Since then scruffy cow ponies given the same advantages as million dollar colts have won the Kentucky Derby. I have also since learned that winos, who slept in the alley behind the Nobel Prize winners' sperm bank, developed a sudden interest in music and literature.

Even I could see the social implications. "Now that we know that every breathing, walking creature is a product of an environment we can ask the state human services people to spend lots of money improving environments so poverty will go away."

Addler nodded. "We'll also get rid of all those silly old stories about IQ and natural aptitude. A story that always annoyed me was about two fellows who showed up at the Pearly Gates. Saint Peter asked the first one what he wanted and he said a new, pink Caddy, a case of beer, and a big house by the ocean. Saint Peter asked the next fellow what he wanted and he said, 'Just a suitcase full of trinkets and the address of that fellow with the Caddy.'"

~ The humble Farmer's Home & Hearth ~

My wife Marsha works hard and I thought it would be nice to take her on a little winter trip down to Key West where it is warm. I opened the AAA tour book and read the motel prices: $599, $279, $498. I says to her, "Maybe we can't go." But then—I looked further down the list and said, look at this. Here are some motels we can afford: $24, $25. She said, "You are looking at the prices of meals in low class restaurants."

~

A question for you coming up here on eating. The other night we went out to supper. Outside of Moody's Diner and Grange suppers, there aren't too many places where I will pay money to eat. Did you ever stop to think that at most restaurants most of what you are paying for is the décor and the privilege of being seen there? A very small percentage of your inflated tab will pay for anything that you have eaten. And if you are one of those people who is rich enough to go out to a restaurant for supper a couple of times a year, I want you to think about that the next time someone slides an oily menu into your hand.

But Marsha and I went out to supper, because, although the friends we go with could buy several restaurants, he is the closest man I know—unless I count my brother. So my friend isn't going to eat anywhere unless it is a buffet style where you can go back three times for cranberry sauce on chicken that melts in your mouth, and a salad bar with carrot salad plus green and yellow melon. And after that, there is all the ice cream you can eat topped off with hot butterscotch or chocolate goo. My friend is going to get more than his seven dollars and forty nine cents worth because he is going to stuff himself like a coyote in a henhouse.

When we had finished off the second heaping plate of chicken with all the fixings, my friend pushed aside his plate and said, "You can feel full,

but there is a special place in your body for dessert." Where do you keep it?

~

My wife, Marsha, *is* the Almost Perfect Woman. When you're been single for fifty-one of your sixty-eight years, you know how scary some women can be, because you've had the opportunity to read the service manuals on several different models. For some reason that I've never understood, some women can't just say what they have to say. They look at you and say, "We've got to have a talk."

So one day I thanked Marsha because she had never said to me, "Robert—we've got to have a talk."

And she said, "*Talk*. What good would it do to have a talk with you? You don't hear half of what I say—and I can't tell what you do hear because *you* don't say anything. You always say that nothing is worth discussing unless it's a life or death situation or if somebody is going to lose a limb. You're just like my father."

That can happen when you marry a younger woman—her father usually is just about your age.

~

I hang onto the banister when I go down stairs. A friend laughed at me and said, "Getting old?"

"Living smart." At sixty-eight, most people know that although they *can* still run down a flight of stairs, one day, they are going to wish that they *hadn't*. It was in writing over 3,000 years ago. There *will* come a day when the pitcher will be broken at the fountain. You might run downstairs for years, but sooner or later you're going to trip on a shoestring or the cuff or your snowmobile suit and break yourself in pieces. Kids do it all the time, but their bones are made of rubber so you seldom hear about it. But a horrible adult example comes quickly to mind. A man on crutches with his leg in a cast said to his friend, "I don't need your help getting down these stairs."

And it was true. He didn't. But he was glad that his friend was there to call an ambulance to take him back to the hospital to reset his broken leg.

The only man in Rockland to break his leg one New Year's Eve did so without the help of drink. He was walking down a flight of stairs with both hands in his pocket, according to an ear witness.

By ear witness, I mean that Charlie Graham told me that he heard step, step, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump.

So even if you're ten years old, hang onto the banister when you come down the stairs. Then, the worst thing that can happen to you is an incurable infection from the wood splinter in your hand.

~

I like spaghetti. Back before I married Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, I ate spaghetti every day. You can read my recipe in the Maine Writers Cook book or on my web page. I don't like to wash dishes so I started eating spaghetti so I wouldn't have to wash pans and dishes after eating. I simply poured the cold meatless Ragu spaghetti sauce right out of the bottle onto the hot spaghetti right there on my dish on the counter beside the sink, and when I finished I just rinsed everything off and left it there where it would be ready for the next meal. You know, after ten or fifteen years of spaghetti sometimes twice a day, you really get to like it.

~

You probably heard about the man who has been trapped at Charles de Gaulle Airport since 1988. His passport got messed up so he can't enter France and yet he is unable to leave it. It was written up in the newspaper because the reporter thought it was such a strange and unusual thing.

But if you compare this unfortunate fellow to a man who doesn't get along with his wife, yet has six kids so they can't afford a divorce, we could probably find several hundred similar cases right here in Maine.

~

Strange and seemingly inexplicable situations sometimes have very simple answers when you analyze them with a bit of common sense. You might have asked yourself why you see so many people with cell phones pressed to their ears while driving cars at high speeds. Here's the answer. My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, wanted buy something over the phone and put it on her credit card. Our phone was out all day yesterday. No problem because my friend, Booger Boy Davis, was standing by with his state of the art cell phone. The Boy dialed the number on his little phone and handed it to Marsha. She got half way through the business when she looked up and said, "I can't hear her. She keeps cutting out. And she can't hear me." The Boy said, "Quick go outside." So Marsha ran outside and after turning around two or three times, like a dog getting ready to lie down in thick grass, she was able to transact her business.

Cell phones have a long way to go. No matter where you are, you can only hear about half of what the other person is saying, but—if you get in your car and drive like a bat, you might find a spot that's just a little bit better.

~

I like my wife, Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman. And, although it might surprise you if you are only forty or fifty years old, from time to time I like to hug my wife. Yes, old men like to hug their wives just like young men like to hug their wives. But I have a hugging problem because ours was a planned marriage. When you get married at fifty-four, it is your brain that makes the decision. I wanted the kind of woman who would get down on her hands and knees and scrub the floor the first time I brought her home. Not because she wanted to—but because she had to. As Marsha's father Bill told me, "It's in the genes," There are women, just like the true princess in the fairy tale, who shriek at the sight of a speck of dust. And if you are willing to wait, you can find a scrubber and cleaner in the same skin as the woman who has to cook tasty, nutritious meals from scratch three times a day. This is why I see nothing unusual or criminal in that company that billed the army for cleaning an office four times in one day. I live in a blizzard of cleaning and cooking. My nose has lost any sensitivity it might once have had after sixteen years of living in a blue haze generated by roasting turkey and Lestoil. I'm talking about a woman who started to take a before-bed shower last night at midnight and ended up wandering around in her bare skin scrubbing down two shower stalls in two bathrooms with a Brillo pad. My friend. Have you ever tried to hug such a woman? This morning, halfway between the sink and the stove, I tried. All I got was a bit of a shoulder when it went by, and I said, "Don't you have time for hugs?" And she said, "Not while I'm busy." So I grasped her firmly by the shoulders—if you've ever tried to stop a Type A woman or a runaway horse, you know what a challenge that was. And I said, "Look me in the eyes." And I said, "Will you please tell me a time—when you're not sound asleep—when you are not busy?" She said, "Something's boiling over on the stove."

~

Do you see grown people face their palms and then drive their hands up inside a steering wheel before they make a turn? Back in 1970 I went to—I think it was the University of Maine for two weeks to learn how to teach driver education. And you do not stick your hand up inside a steering wheel. You keep your hands on the outside of the steering wheel. But some Maine people learned how to drive a tractor before they could ride a bicycle. They were so little that they had to stand up and put both feet on the clutch to push it down. And they got in the habit of turning their hands around and sticking them up inside the steering wheel because before the days of power steering, it was the only way they could pull the wheel around. So the next time you're riding with someone who sticks a hand up into a steering wheel to help make the turn, remember that they've lived a hard life. Before they got on the school bus in the morning they already had in two hours of collecting and grading eggs.

~

This evening's topic is non verbal communication. My friend, Walter Lilly from Dresden, is an expert on body language. How you walk and throw your body around says more about you than what you actually say. With actors, this is known as stage presence. You know some very nice people who walk around looking like sneaks. And if you didn't know them you'd say, "I don't trust him, or her." On the other hand, I remember one of my neighbors who would steal anything that wasn't nailed down. He always smiled and looked happy.

My father was a master of non verbal communication. I don't remember that he said much. My father came from Sweden so he didn't have to say much. Somewhere, early on way back in the forgotten past, one got the general impression that he meant business, which eliminated all of the empty words you hear parents sprinkling on their children today, and saved us both a lot of time. When I was little, my father wouldn't say anything when I was doing something bad, but he'd whistle da da da da da da da, da da da. And now that I think of it, that's probably why he was such a good whistler.

I've probably only raised my voice two or three times in the past 10 years. My good friend George Page from Gilmanton, NH, was in my driveway one day and saw one of them. There is usually no need of hollering. When someone calls and says, "Is Marsha there?" I clap my hands three times, and she'll pick up the other phone. When I want her I walk from room to room, saying, "wife, wife, wife." And now that you've brought it to my attention, a voiceless labio dental fricative is about the worst phoneme anyone could use to attract someone's attention, and from now on I will attempt to attract her attention with, "bang, bang, bang."

How do you communicate with members of your household when words are unnecessary or impossible? Do you have your own private signs and signals, like a secret order? Do you whistle or make faces?

~

Some of us in St. George haven't gone very far. I live only a few hundred feet from where my great-great-great-grandfather lived over 200 years ago. Over 190 years ago he warmed his feet at the fireplace that was in my house. Some of his descendants who are my third cousins live right next door. The other day, in a moment of deep refection at the dinner table I pointed at the house next door and said to my wife Marsha, "Ten generations have lived right there—and I knew seven of them." Marsha said, "Only seven?"

~

On May 11th, my old yellow house will celebrate its 193rd birthday. I bought it, completely furnished, from one of mother's third cousins. When I moved in, I admit that I put a stainless steel sink in the kitchen and a bathtub and flush in a small closet upstairs. I did not, however, find it necessary to tear out any of the walls. But isn't that the first thing some people do when they buy an old house? Rip out this and rip out that. And the same goes for the grounds outdoors. Fill in this hole and dig another hole there. But, then, after you've lived in the house and on the grounds for a few years, you begin to notice little things. You discover why the hole you filled in needed to be there, and why the wall you tore out needed to be there. When we move into houses that are almost 200 years old, why shouldn't we credit the family that has lived in it for the past 150 years with a bit of intelligence? It takes generations to find out where the furniture belongs in a house, and the people who put in the walls did it for a reason. Why can't we learn from them why the house is the way it is? If you ever filled in a hole out back, as I did, and later learned why it needed to be there, or regretted that you tore out a very necessary wall, I'd like to hear from you.

~

The other night I repeated an old poem to my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman. Because she is only fifty-four she had never heard it. "Women's faults are many, men have only two: Everything they say, and everything they do."

~

There are two kinds of people on this planet: those of us who get tired, and the lucky ones who don't. It is my understanding that Gary Hyvarinen doesn't get tired. Raol Champaign and Donald Jacobson can allegedly get by on four or five hours sleep. My Onkle Rulle in Sweden said he never got tired, and if Bernard Davis ever gets tired, he won't admit it. If my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, were a farm girl, she'd have her day's work done and be out in the henhouse an hour before sunrise, shining a light in the rooster's eyes, trying to get him to crow a little earlier, just so everybody else would have to get up.

It's not fair, but I get tired in the afternoon. I can usually get through the mornings, but at three or four or five in the afternoon, this tiredness can hit me like a sledgehammer. Bang. There are exciting things I want to do on my farm, but all of a sudden I can't get out of my tracks. I just want to drop.

Yesterday I says to my wife, "Why did you marry a man who is always tired?"

She said, "Well, when I used to come down here to see you evenings, how was I to know you'd been sleeping all afternoon?"

~

It is unfortunate that no young people listen to this program because I'm about to impart a significant bit of wisdom that they would ignore even if they were listening. My topic is: the danger of mating with an incompatible person. The divorce rate is high and although the reason for divorce is simple, it is difficult to explain. To begin with, there is a human race only because our bodies develop from the bottom up which means that the last organ to become functional is the one between our ears. You've heard me say it often: "I got married at the age of fifty-four and when you get married at fifty-four it is your BRAIN that makes the decision." Tens of thousands of years ago it was all right if people twelve or fourteen years old started families, because before they were twenty one of them had either been stepped on by a woolly mammoth or been eaten by a saber tooth tiger. So long before man and wife had time to discover they were incompatible, Mother Nature had already eliminated the need for the endless unpleasant discussions that lead to divorce. Could we cut down on the divorce rate if we were to live together for two or three years before getting married? I used to think we might, but there is new evidence indicating that even sixteen years of living together might not be long enough. This morning my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, said, "You are using my toothbrush." I said that this was impossible, because there was a green toothbrush in the cup and there was a red toothbrush in my hand. I said, "Ever since time began I have used a red toothbrush." I am glad that Marsha and I are not planning to have children, because she said, "So have I."

~

My father stopped going to the movies in 1945 after seeing *Lost Weekend*. In case you are very young, I'll mention that *Lost Weekend* was a movie about a man with ten dollars who stayed drunk for four days. My father said that it was impossible for a man with only ten dollars to stay drunk for four days and he never went to the movies again. I have not gone to the movies for at least seventeen years but I'm going again, hopefully before the month is out, and I can hardly wait. I stopped going to the movies because of that horrible booming background music that drowns out anything that resembles speech. I think the last time I went to the movies was with Julian and Peggy Rubenstein. Peggy sat between us and told us what they had said and if it was funny, Julian and I laughed—about thirty seconds after everyone else. Something like Tom Brokaw interviewing the reporter from Bagdad. Tom asks him a question and then there's that delay while the sound catches up.

But I am going to the movies for the first time in many years very soon because I can't wait for the movie to come out on that little CD disk that we put into the box—you know that black box thing that the kids gave Marsha and hooked up on top of our television set. If Sinclair Lewis had just made a movie called *Babbitt* or *Elmer Gantry* and the whole world was going to see it for the first time this week would you go? I would. My father came to this country in 1930 to pound granite with a hammer and turn it into paving blocks, and even though he had only an eighth grade formal education, he read a lot and he liked what Sinclair Lewis had to say. If John Steinbeck had just made a movie called *The Grapes of Wrath* and it was going to be shown in the movies for the first time would you go? I would. We're talking about prize winning genius here. Of course they had to go to Europe to get their prizes because Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck were social commentators, and way back then there were a few people on this side of the pond who didn't like what they had to say, partly because it wasn't nice but mostly because it was true. And if you haven't gathered your family around the fireplace lately to read parts of T*he Grapes of Wrath* or *Babbitt* or *Elmer Gantry* to your children, they might be better for it if you did. Even though I was very small when my father told me what Steinbeck had to say, it became more meaningful year after year, and the older I get the more I admire both Steinbeck and my father. I wish that my father were still here so I could take him to the movies with me very soon—because even though papa was not an American, like most intelligent Europeans he could recognize and appreciate American genius.

~

After five years of marriage, our home is still a hotbed of romance. The other day while The Almost Perfect Woman was working at her desk, I leaned over her and said, "MMMMM, you smell like Christmas trees." She said, "It must be the toilet bowl cleaner on my hands."

~

When I go into stores I have the feeling that people are watching me. I mentioned it to my wife, and she said that people are probably looking at me to find out what they should not be wearing.

~

I feel very good about myself this evening. I don't know if the alignment of the stars has anything to do with it or not, but I feel very comfortable. I am at peace with the world because I have finally done something that very few people do. I have made preparations for a day in the future. I know that day *will* come for me, and you know that day *will* come for you. I will be ready when that day comes, but will you?

I have that inner glow—that feeling of security, well being and contentment that is only felt—by a man who has taken his new telephone book—and has pasted, right on the front cover, the hours that the dump is open.

~

Did you see that newspaper feature on becoming an Outdoor Woman? My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, was years ahead of her time. Thirty years ago she was teaching groups of twenty or thirty kids how to survive in the Great North Woods. They lived in tents while cold rain poured down. They cooked in cold rain and ate in cold rain and hiked in cold rain. She was still able to smile, after living for weeks under conditions that would have depressed a Neolithic Eskimo. Now Marsha is married to a sedentary, bookish person, so now, when she feels the need for a challenge in the great outdoors, she mows the lawn.

~

My father got his first television set when I was twenty years old, and one of the first broadcasts I ever remember seeing was a weather report for Maine. The forecaster said that it was unseasonably cold. The entire country was boiling over, 80, 90 and 100 degrees, but in Maine it was unseasonably cold. That was over forty-five years ago, and every weather report I have ever seen ever since has said the same thing. Unseasonably cold. People in the rest of the world are still running their air conditioning but in Maine it's unseasonably cold. Have you ever heard of it being warmer than it should be in Maine? Or have you even ever heard of an average temperature in Maine? No, It is always twenty to thirty degrees colder than average. The grass in your lawn is always a foot high before it's warm enough to get out to mow it. Any black fly that puts in an appearance before Memorial Day immediately freezes to death. Living in Maine between November and June can be compared to a science fiction movie where the entire population lives in frozen suspended animation for seven months out of the year.

As soon as the Almost Perfect Woman is old enough to retire, I'm going to spend the rest of my winters in Southern Spain.

~

Have you been watching the weather report on TV? The temperature outside might be fifteen degrees. When I was a kid, they'd let it go at that. But now, for some reason that I don't understand, they try to make it sound worse by adding in a thing they call the wind chill factor. So now they'll say, "It's fifteen degrees outside, but when you figure in the wind chill factor, it's ten below." And then they'll explain that ten below is very, very cold, and that you should not go out unless you cover your hands and your face. Notice that they don't say anything about covering your

head or ears. They know that unless your IQ is higher than 140 or lower than 80, you wouldn't be seen dead wearing a hat even in the coldest weather. Of course, if your IQ is higher than 140 or lower than 80, you don't notice what other men are wearing so you wear whatever is comfortable.

But I want to get back to this wind chill factor thing that appeared a few years ago to make our lives more miserable. Before long someone is going to figure out a way to make it even worse than that. And then you'll hear, "It's ten degrees out, but with the wind chill factor it feels like fifteen below. And, if you figure in the moisture factor we get from living here on the coast, it really feels like twenty-five below."

Every time the weather man throws out another factor to describe the temperatures in Maine, all he is really doing is driving up real estate values in Florida.

~

Did you watch the Olympic games a while back? I was impressed by the athletes but not by the clumsy clocks used to determine the winners. One woman was first by four thousandths of a second, but you and I can think of situations where the clock would need to measure *millionths* of a second.

Your wife has gone shopping. You finish up the little project she assigned you and then decide to have a nap while waiting for her to return. You start to lie down on the couch. Your head moves toward the pillow. When your head hits the pillow a timing device is activated that measures how many millionths of a second it takes your wife to enter the room.

~

How often do you sit down at a dinner table with your best friends? My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, and I do it often. This is because Marsha is never happier than when she is preparing a meal for friends. Last summer Brad Terry and some other musicians showed up before a concert and when my wife counted seventeen people eating at her table in the dining room she almost cried with joy. There is nothing nicer than sharing a meal—notice I do use that word "sharing" in this context—There is nothing nicer than sharing a meal with friends who have similar interests.

On the other hand,—well, let me tell you. It was last Thanksgiving that our best friends invited us over for dinner. Everything went well until just before the pie which is when friends of our friends turned on their karaoke machine. I would not even want to be in a room where Natalie Cole sang along with a karaoke machine. I don't know about you, but I would rather take a beating than be exposed to what comes out of a

karaoke machine. I whispered to my wife that I was walking home, thinking, of course, that she would get in the car and pick me up before I was down to the end of the driveway. And for five and a half miles I kept looking over my shoulder wondering where she was. By the time I dragged my 170 pounds into the house, I suspected that she was trying to tell me something. Luckily, I had only had one helping and no dessert, so I experienced no abdominal pain. And when you think about it, would it really hurt most of us if we were to walk five and a half miles—every day? Because of my unique posture there was another benefit—on the way home I picked up 43 cents in change and a 3/8 socket.

~

Thank you for spending time with me here on The humble Farmer where we listen to old fashioned music and occasionally talk about strange and peculiar things that are sometimes difficult to believe. My computer guru, Chris, says that his grandfather just moved to Bridgeton, which really doesn't have anything to do with this story. I just threw it in to give you a frame of reference. Chris is a young man who has a young wife and Chris says that his wife got mad one day. So he asked her why she was mad. And she said that she was thinking what he would have replied if she had ever said such and such to him, and what she *imagined* he would have said made her mad. Don't you feel bad for young men who are married to easily excited young women who get annoyed at things they make up in their inexperienced minds? Those of us who are married to mature women know that they don't need to *imagine* things to get mad.

~

You probably remember the song *Flat Foot Floozy with the Floi Floi.* When I first heard *Flat Foot Floozy with the Floi Floi* I didn't even know what flat feet were. Years later I found out what floozy meant. But I just found out that floi means sycophant in Dutch. And just now, while looking up *Flat Foot Floozy* on the Internet, I read that *floi floi* is also a slang word for a certain type of venereal disease. But sycophant would work in that context, too. What do you think?

While looking that up, I found a web page of bumper stickers. One says: Alcohol and calculus don't mix. Never drink and derive. And here's one I wish I'd thought up thirty years ago when I was sending personals to the Maine Times: "Archaeologist seeks attractive young woman willing to date old thing." And another one I like: "Ask me about my vow of silence." Here's one right out of *1984* that is certainly also applicable today: "The beatings will continue until morale improves." I'll end with one that is very close to home: "Blessed are they who can laugh at themselves for they shall never cease to be amused."

~

You've heard people say, "It's a well known fact that matter can be neither created nor destroyed."

But on the other hand, you have heard of the famous Black Holes, that supposedly eat matter. Anything close to a Black Hole gets sucked in and is never seen again.

Science is full of such impossible contradictions. For example, I have discovered the opposite of a Black Hole under my cupboard. It creates matter. I know it's impossible, and I don't even believe it myself, but at least twice a day I see the proof, and here it is.

At home, I have an empty tube of toothpaste. The brand name is not important. Three or four months ago I used the very last of the toothpaste in this tube, but I put it back on the shelf because I thought there would be one more squeeze left in there. And sure enough, the next day, there was.

The same thing happened the following day. And the next. And this has been going on for several months.

I know of no published natural laws that would account for this, but every night, on a dark shelf near my sink, enough toothpaste is cloned in this tube to give me one more brushing.

~ Maine Divorce Court ~

Many of the starry-eyed boys and girls who are getting married in Maine this summer have no idea what they're getting into.

True, statistically oriented young lovers are well aware that two out of three marriages end in a divorce court, usually years before the inevitable two or three toddlers start school. And they've all watched *Divorce Court* on TV which my next-door neighbor, Gramp Wiley, and I also enjoy every evening at five.

But divorce, as romanticized by TV's *Divorce Court*, has not much bearing on the everyday type of divorce newlyweds can look forward to around here.

I can't remember the last time Judge Pease judiciously split a neighbor's estate down the middle, leaving the bride with a stable of Arabian horses and $15,000 a month in alimony, and the groom with the Condos in Switzerland and a collection of antique Buggetti roadsters snuggled in a solar/wood heated garage.

To be sure, our initial claims and counter-claims of infidelity would be just about the same as the lies sworn to in Los Angeles. But after that, anyone unfortunate enough to visit our county court house during divorce proceedings would witness something more along the order of this:

"He ain't the man I married, Judge. Back then he warn't nothing but a fireball of romance. I mean it was like every night we'd be out riding around rotary traffic. He warn't crying about missing his precious football and basketball and baseball on TV then. All he thought about was getting a few beers into me. Sometimes we'd just park—with the motor running when it was cold—and chug beer and watch our friends in their cars going round and round the rotary. On weekends—that's Friday and Saturday, Judge—two or three stops in Dunkin Donuts in one evening warn't nothing. Course, we used the bathroom there too, but you'd thought the man was made of money."

"Cross examination, please."

"Was your husband aware that you already had six children back when you were—dating?"

"I didn't say I didn't have 'em."

"But isn't it true that you left the children at your sister's house so you could claim that you were a senior in high school?"

"I was a senior in high school."

"No further questions, your honor."

"Mr. Schnook to the stand, please."

"She's not the same woman I married, Judge. You never see a woman so fussy and neat—even had her own teeth, and her all of twenty-four years old at the time. The way she was talking I figured she loved getting up at five to work in the factory. Of course, I can't work in the winter and was figuring that check would come in pretty handy for tractor payments."

"And now we come to the division of the marital estate. After careful deliberation I'm awarding what's left of the trailer to Mrs. Schnook. Mr. Schnook is to set it back up on the cement blocks and must never ram it with the tractor again. He is to take his two dozen bantam roosters out of the shower stall and sell them. The proceeds will be used to replace Mrs. Schnook's hair drier, which disappeared sometime last September beneath the guano."

"The twenty-three cats will be divided equally between the two parties with the dogs and the sheep staying in the trailer until Mr. Schnook can demonstrate to this court that he can provide for them."

"Mr. Schnook. You have a question?"

"Yes, Judge. Just in case this ever runs on that TV *Divorce Court* can I have the television rights?"

~ Smart Women at Home ~

When I walked in on my psychologist friend Addler he was stretched out on his couch and crying like a baby—between primal screams.

"Filter plugged on your pool again?" I asked quietly.

He continued to look at the ceiling as the half-choked words came tumbling out. "Communists—taking over everything—now have a firm foothold in the Reader's Digest—no hope left for the country."

I gingerly took the crumpled magazine from his hand and read the caption beneath a woman with two small children, "What's a Smart Woman Like You Doing at Home?"

"This looks bad," I gasped as I quickly sat down.

"It could destroy the country we know and love today," my friend observed. "This smart woman, Linda Burton, is an excellent writer. Loved her work and all that, so when she had kids she tried to find someone who could take care of them days."

"Easy enough to find."

"Yes, but she wanted her kids to learn confidence and trust. She wanted their questions to be answered by an intelligent someone who really cared for them. Unfortunately, at one place she found the day-care woman asleep on the couch while eleven small children wandered around in front of a TV."

"That wasn't right," I cried. "It's not fair to spy on the person taking care of your kids."

Addler sat up and almost screamed. "This Linda Burton woman says that the raising of children entails more than leaving them with a custodian."

"Talk like that could pull this country down."

He fell back on the couch and very slowly said, "She wanted a person who was alert, humorous, and gentle—someone who could encourage the children's creativity and answer their questions in a loving manner."

I closed my eyes and whispered, "I know. The person she needed at home was herself."

It was several minutes before Addler could control himself enough to speak. He finally said, "It's been at least two years since the commies reported in Pravda that equality of the sexes and the working woman were shredding the fabric of Russian society. Two years ago the new party line encouraged men to get their hands out of the dishpan—let women do women's work, let men do men's work."

Without raising my eyes I said, "It was only a matter of time before that poison spread here."

"Imagine coming home from school to find a waiting mother who loves you," Addler wailed. "To begin with, you've eliminated the need for a school psychologist—thousands of jobs will be lost. There'll be milk and cookies but no TV until your homework is done. Kids will be encouraged to read and think."

"Vandalism would drop. Paint and glass companies would take a financial beating. There would be no little criminals growing up to be big criminals. Did you know," he continued, "that we're planning to build one thousand state and county prisons within the next ten years at a cost of $200,000 a cell?"

"A mother who loved her kids enough to stay home and take care of them could hit our building contractor friends where it hurts," I agreed.

"To say nothing of whole cadres of social workers, and guards who would be without jobs. Actually, every social agency in the country would take a licking if enough mothers decided to be mothers. The word 'angst' would disappear from the yuppie vocabulary."

"This could be the beginning of the end."

Addler nodded grimly. "A handful of smart women in their homes would destroy the country we love today."

~ The Almost Perfect Woman ~

Marsha, the almost perfect woman, and I were on a ferry boat between Sweden and Denmark, when I leaned over and whispered in her ear, "This trip has re-kindled the romance in our marriage." She said, "Then why are we going home?"

~

Everyone likes my wife Marsha because she listens to what you have to say. She knows how to make sympathetic noises when you are telling her your problems.

For example, last week some woman confessed that her husband was crazy. And my wife put her hand on this woman's shoulder and said, "I can relate."

~

I was sorry to hear that President Reagan has Alzheimer's. My wife is fourteen years younger than I am and she will know when my mind is completely gone without seeing me drool or wet myself. Because when the day comes when I can be legally declared non-compos-mentis, she will hear me call Lawyer Crandall and ask him to take me ice fishing north of Millinocket.

~

From watching me on television, you might get the impression that I'm quite a natty dresser. I spare no expense to look good for you, my viewers. But the almost perfect woman, Marsha my wife, is from Connecticut, where they have a different standard. And one day last week she asked me why I always wore such ratty clothes. I said, "Don't think of the clothes. It's the body underneath that counts."

And she said, "Oh, don't make it any worse than it is."

~

Have you ever noticed that they tie people together when they climb mountains? One drops off and pulls the other one down. It's similar to marriage.

~

Kids know more than they did forty years ago. My wife Marsha, the almost perfect woman, has two daughters, and when Alison, the oldest one, turned eighteen, Marsha gave her a book called *What Every Girl Should Know*. The next week Alison sent the publisher an outline of four new chapters.

~

The daughter of a friend of mine wears perfume that gags me whenever she's in the room. My friend told me that she doesn't wear it to attract boys but to weed out the wimps.

~

My wife and her two daughters cook for me and their friends. When they cook for their friends, they walk out to the car with a pie in each hand. They put one pie on the roof of the car so they'll have a free hand to open the door. Then they put the pie in their hand in the car and drive off. Sometimes they can get quite a ways before the pie on the roof slides off, but usually it smashes in the road when they make the turn coming out of the driveway.

I happened to be putting clapboards on my house during the last pie smashing incident, so I quickly got a barn broom to sweep the rhubarb pie and glass out of the road before anyone got their tires cut.

Time was the problem. I'd no sooner get out in the middle of the road with my broom when a car would come by. Not one driver seemed to wonder what a foolish old man was doing out in the middle of the road with a broom. Not one car even slowed down.

When they'd get close I'd jump out of the way and turn my back, so as not to get rhubarb pie and glass in my face, and they'd wale right through the center of it. I was all hunched over with my back to the road getting splattered with rhubarb pie and broken glass. It would have made a colorful video.

I've thought about this for a week now. Here's a man in the middle of the road sweeping something, but nobody even slowed down. If anything, they tried to get their tire right in the middle of that red, gooey splattering mess. I've finally realized why. Those Port Clyde boys probably thought it was a dead cat.

~

I just remembered that our fourth wedding anniversary was last week and that I didn't get my wife an anniversary present. I'll bet she forgot it, too, don't you?

~

It's July, but there are not many places here on the coast of Maine that have air conditioning. We only need it one or two days a year. But we had a couple of those days in June and women complained. This is because their dresses are now so short that their legs stick to the chair. When they stand up and their legs and the leather chair come apart you hear, "hzzzzzzzzzzz," and everybody looks. Or they try to slide sideways and you hear, "Eeeeeeeeee."

I don't know what they heard when that woman you've all heard about dropped her gown while reading a poem at her commencement exercises. All she had on was a pair of boots.

Some people in the audience were very pleased when she stood there naked. They said that she was making a statement. A social commentary.

My wife and I were discussing this with a couple of friends soon after it happened. My friend mentioned that I'm on-stage somewhere in the country two or three times a week. He said, "Why don't you do it, Robert? The lobster festival would be a good time for you to make an on-stage social commentary."

My wife whispered, "He doesn't have all that much to say."

~

Halloween is my wife's favorite holiday and it takes the Almost Perfect Woman a week to prepare for the little trick or treaters. She buys in bulk and this year I counted—one gigantic bag of Tootsie Roll Pops. One huge package of Fun Size Snickers Bars, a monstrous sack of Milk Chocolate Miniature Peanut Butter Cups, and enough Fun Size packs of M&M Peanut Chocolate Candies to last American Psychologists until the end of the millennium. Then she turns on the outside light, sits in a chair by the door, and hopes that nobody will come.

~

It can be statistically proven that people come in three sizes: large, average and small. Because most of the women used in television commercials are no more than skin stretched on very small bones, the American woman has been conditioned to place herself in the large category. You can't look at a television commercial without realizing that someone is trying to make women dissatisfied with the way they look, smell or feel.

This is why even an average sized, sensible woman might be tempted to lose weight—to diet.

Have you ever lived with a person who eats nothing but salad? After a week you beg them to wolf brownies or at least put enough chocolate sauce on their lettuce to make them sociable.

My wife dieted faithfully for three weeks without losing a pound. She got so cranky that I started avoiding her—I even fell asleep drinking my nightly hot chocolate in front of the TV and stayed on the couch all night. And then, night after night, the Almost Perfect Woman lost weight.

It was two or three weeks before our doctor figured out why. The television ads for weight loss had made her so sensitive to calories that she'd been gaining half a pound every night just by smelling the hot chocolate on my breath.

~

When Marsha's daughters come home from college for a weekend, they very often have young men in tow. Daughters camp on the couch in the living room, and the young men are sent upstairs.

Why, you ask, would anyone in his right mind come to a place where he knows he'll have to sleep upstairs, alone, in an ancient uninsulated Maine farmhouse in the middle of February?

I just found out it earns them three credits from Outward Bound.

~

Did you see the *Thorn Birds* on TV last week? I didn't, but Marsha did. I did see a few minutes where the hero was being punched out by Nazis in Italy but, then, a week later, he was riding a horse in Australia.

I asked how he got to Australia and was told that he was working there with wretched bees.

"Wretched bees? What's he doing with wretched bees?"

And she said, "Refugees, refugees. I wish you'd get a hearing aid."

~

My friend, Bernard Davis, owns a Maine seafood restaurant in Fort Myers, Florida. Just about every week Billy Atwood loads a trailer truck full of lobsters and one of the Elwell boys drives it down there. You might have heard me mention before that when my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, quit teaching last year, she went to work in Maine's Best Seafood in Fort Myers. Davis was glad to have Marsha in his restaurant, because he is an excellent businessman. He knew that Marsha could out work any two other employees. He knew that when Marsha is working, she doesn't take time to go to the bathroom or eat dinner. Works right

through nine to five without stopping. He knew that Marsha would not steal—his cash drawer would not be $60 to $100 short every single day. He knew that when that restaurant was jammed packed and people were lined up at the door, Marsha would not be joining the cook and several waitresses on the back porch for a cigarette. He knew how much Marsha loves to scrub, and that she would clean places in his restaurant that had never been cleaned before.

On Christmas day, the Davis's came over to our wretched trailer, and when we opened our Christmas presents together, Davis was overwhelmed by the nice gifts Marsha gave him. As he opened each package his mouth opened wider with surprise, and at last he could contain himself no longer. His eyes got all misty, and with a voice that was choked with emotion he looked at his wife and said, "All these nice gifts are telling me just one thing—we're paying her too much money."

~

If you've been driving the roads in Maine this summer, you've seen your share of balloons tied on mailboxes. Weddings. You can't go anywhere but what you see signs of a wedding.

When I married Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, nine years ago today, you were invited. You might have been there. That was back before I learned about the power of television, so I simply put a notice in the newspapers and blabbed about it on my radio show. Invited everybody. People were not allowed to bring presents, but were asked to buy something at the auction after the wedding so there'd be room in my house for Marsha to move in. Timmy Polky's wife bought an antique wooden pot chair that had been in my house since at least 1840. I bet he was some pleased when his wife brought that home. Everyone was supposed to bring something to eat to my wedding, so there was plenty of food. Jan Korpinen took a video of the whole thing if you ever want to see it. My cousin Ronny Lord took pictures.

I want you people who are still planning weddings to listen to what I'm saying. That wedding didn't cost me nothing. The guests brought the food, and what I sold at the auction paid for the ads in the newspapers. And people had just as much fun and as much food and as much good company as they would at a big budget wedding—five or six hundred dollars.

What kind of wedding do you enjoy attending the most? One where you show up in a tux and nibble on carrot and celery sticks, or one like mine where you wear dungarees and pig out on Sally's beans and fresh crabmeat sandwiches?

~

Let me tell you young fellows a little bit about being married. I was discussing marriage with some men friends a week ago, and every one of us told variations on the same story. Your things get put in cardboard boxes and are moved out to the barn or down cellar until they get moldy enough to throw away. Her things get put in bureau drawers or in closets or on shelves in the house. I used to have a half a dollar that Albert Smalley gave me for a dozen ears of corn. I saved it for many years in a bureau drawer—I was going to give it to his great-grandson. But I have no idea of where it is now. I used to have some old toys and school papers in a desk—things I'd had for over fifty years—but there is nothing in that desk today that belongs to me. Every year they claim another desk, another closet.

You will discover that you wife does not prize the things that you hold dear. Very soon after our marriage, I found a 1905 brass dog tag in the trash. I said to her, "My dear, how could you throw out this 1905 brass dog tag that has been on that window sill in the entry for over eighty years?"

Never try to argue with your wife, because women are logical. She said, "Well, what good is it?"

~

This week I got a notice from AT&T that their PRO WATS savings plan for customers is about to arrive. I am pretty sure that I won't get these saving unless I sign up for them. Not a week goes by but what I am notified of savings I can get from the telephone company. Why are they always asking me to sign up for some great program where I'll realize great savings? Think how we'd all love them if, without fanfare, they simply put those savings on our bills.

~

Have your kids got the end of the summer blues because it's time to start school? Do they simply sit around and stare off into space with glassy eyes? Do you find that they're not interested in any of the things that were so much fun when school let out a couple of months ago? Are they grumpy? Do they argue and find fault with everything?

If you think it's a tough week to live in a house with a kid who has to go back to school, you should try living with a teacher.

~

Why is it that people who call don't come right out and tell the person answering the phone what they want? Some woman called my wife the other day and asked for me. Marsha could have told her what she wanted

to know. But this woman asked for Robert, so Marsha had to drag me out of the cellar where I was pouring cement. In a primitive *or* civilized society it is possible that the spouse knows what's going on and can speak for the other. What does John want for that wood splitter? Either the wife says $500. or she doesn't know. And then, if she can't answer the question, it's time to move to the proper authority. When I answer the phone and they ask for Marsha isn't it possible that I am capable of telling the caller that we do not want to buy plastic siding for our house?

Let me know if these things concern you.

~

No matter what you have heard on television about how big and roomy the new pickup trucks are, pickup trucks are getting smaller and smaller. One of my friends has one of these so-called big, new American pickup trucks with a snowplow on the front, so I know what I'm talking about.

When I was in high school over forty years ago I was driving the same white 1919 Model T pickup truck that you see me driving every summer. And I can distinctly remember that Roy Swanson and I could sit on either end of that seat, in complete comfort, and right there on that seat between us, there was still plenty of space for Mary Anne Pellicani and Carol Hawkins. If we scrunched up a little bit, and I've got to admit that then it would be crowded, we could make room for John Lantz and Patty Benner.

You hear what I'm telling you about pickup trucks. Last week my wife and I spent a leisurely evening visiting friends. When it came time to go home it was snowing wicked and the snow had piled up outside. And my friend said, "There's no way you can get home in this. I'll take you down in the big truck."

So he jumped in behind the wheel. And his wife slid in beside him, and my wife slid in beside her. And you know, I had to ride home in the back of the truck.

~

Here in Maine, every time someone buys a new lawnmower, their lawn gets bigger. They feel that they have to mow more. I enjoy mowing the lawn, which is why my lawn is so big. Of course, I ride on the rider mower, which keeps me ahead of the black flies. My wife, on the other hand, recommends the push mower to any woman wanting to keep her girlish figure. Three or four years ago when we started mowing our vast expanse of lawn, I dug out every rock that showed, and I was severely criticized for it. The only approved way to remove rocks and ledge in Maine is to wear them down with your mower.

~ Santa Something ~

I'm so gosh darn old I can remember when most men wore hats. Kennedy didn't wear a hat and a great industry went down the drain. Had The President favored a knitted ski cap—the colorful version of the black watch cap we wore on board ship—or a heavy red cap with earlaps, I'd be right in style. Today I'm among the very few men who go to town and slouch down Main Street with such a rig pulled down over their ears. Frankly, about the only men I've seen in town dressed like that are either retarded or geniuses. They don't know or care anything about fashion, and dress with only their personal comfort in mind

One evening within the past six months I innocently wandered before a TV and witnessed a scene ostensibly filmed in a northern Minnesota winter. A man of perhaps forty and his son were out in the barnyard chewing over something pretty heavy and taking their sweet time about it. I couldn't attend to the dialogue because I was so struck with the fact that the man wasn't wearing a hat. Oh yes, he had on one of those brown sheepskin coats with the wool turned in, so he could have modeled for an Eddie Bauer catalog or run for Governor. But fifty below zero is not uncommon up in the Midwest and any fool knows that in real life his ears would have dropped off.

I'm always amazed at the amount of suffering the average human being tolerates just to look fashionable—or, more correctly, to keep from looking different. Women's shoes are the classic example. Imagine, if you will, a Christmas dance for assembly line workers. After an hour of intense pain, sensible women discard their shoes.

Shift the scene to Washington and the Inaugural Ball. Can you see the Vice-President's wife kicking off her shoes at 10:30 with the groan, "I've had enough of this." I am suggesting there is an absolute correlation between one's station on the social ladder and a willingness to suffer for the sake of fashion.

I had pleasantly dozed off while savoring these and other Christmassy thoughts when a cupboard door shut in the pantry.

"Santa Claus," I shouted. "You're in the wrong place if you're looking for cookies and milk."

"Actually," a voice said, "I was hoping I could blend this tofu and yogurt in your Cuisinart."

"You don't talk like Santa Claus," I said accusingly as I entered the pantry. "And you sure don't look like Santa Claus."

The fellow facing me was wearing a red Spandex jumpsuit. His black slippers with the strap across the top came straight from Mainland China and contrasted sharply with his permed hair. He resembled an aging Peter Pan, if you can imagine the part being played by Richard Simmons. Gone were his macho black boots and wide black belt.

Santa said, "I had to change. You see me the way people want me to be today. The pipe, of course, was the first to go."

"You are a role model for children," I agreed.

"The tobacco lobby offered me North Carolina and Jamaica if I'd keep it. Then TOPS put an end to those delicious ham and egg breakfasts." He put his hand where he had once shook like a bowlful of jelly.

"I don't miss the fur trim on my suit, except when it's really cold. You know, of course, that members of the more militant animal rights' groups now throw buckets of blood on anyone who wears fur."

While I was wondering where they got the blood, Santa continued:

"The snowmobile doesn't make that great a silhouette against the moon but it was the best I could do when they took my reindeer."

"How can there be a Santa Claus without reindeer?" I cried.

"You might well ask how there can be a country fair without oxen pulling and horse racing. The same people who got them got me."

I said, "I didn't know that public opinion could change you."

Santa attempted unsuccessfully to peer over the top of his contact lenses and said, "Oh, I always changed a bit down through the years. You'll notice it in any collection of my old photographs. And, of course, every country has a different idea of what I'm supposed to look like. I can't deny, though, that your generation has been tougher on me than any I've ever seen."

"I'm surprised you aren't pressured into wearing a business suit."

"I can't get in when I wear a suit and tie. People think I'm a missionary making house calls."

~ The humble Farmer's Foreign Affairs ~

Every day I dip into my world class library of Harlequin Romances and read either Dutch or French. I often underline the words I don't know and put them on little flash cards. Thirty five years ago I dropped out of graduate school to be with my mother as she slowly died from second hand cigarette smoke, and if that hadn't happened I'd probably still be a full time college student studying languages. No matter how old I get, I still enjoy studying. For two weeks I've had quelque part, which is one of the hardest words in the French language, printed in one inch letters, taped on the light in my bedroom. In an effort to memorize quelque part, which means somewhere, I go around singing, "Quelque part, over the rainbow." It is a terrible thing to realize that I'm in the same category as Boxer, the horse, who planned to devote the rest of his life to learning the remaining twenty-two letters of the alphabet.

~

You know that I enjoy learning to read several languages. Because I won't live long enough to read Voltaire or Thomas Mann in the original, my elementary texts are Harlequin Romances. You can write to an author and she will often send you the same book in seven languages. My friend, the great sculptor Steve Lindsay, is going to Italy soon. Steve is fluent in French and tells me that he has read one of my Italian Harlequins twice. Some of this world literature is suitable for high school language classes and you have often heard me encourage language teachers to at least investigate the Harlequin Romance for classroom use. Some of them are funny, well written, and contain nothing that you would be ashamed to have your grandchild read. Besides learning vocabulary, simple conversation and idiomatic expressions, the advanced student finds items worthy of reflection. Listen. My translation from the French: "She contemplated

her painted toe nails and wondered how long she could maintain her sophisticated image."

To an old Maine man, painted toe nails shriek out shameless hussy. Isn't it interesting that this twenty-one year old girl had the impression that sophistication comes from dress or things like painted toenails. Wouldn't it be possible to find a woman living in a jungle tree house who possessed more sophistication drinking out of a coconut shell than you'd find in the painted toenail refugees from the Jerry Springer show? Please tell me what sophistication means to you.

~

When my father first came to this country and started to learn English, he read a sentence about a man who went up on a hill to get something. "To get" in Scandinavian means two goats, so my father thought the man went up on the hill with two goats. In 1960 my aunt sent me to the store in Högsäter, Sweden to get some grönsaker which is green vegetables. I came home with strösaker which is sugar. These things happen when you are only starting to get a grip on a new language. If you have learned two or more languages as an adult these silly things have happened to you and I'd like to hear about the ones you remember. Jack, my sixty-nine year old cousin from Sweden, spent ten days in Fort Lauderdale where he wandered about like a bewildered but sober college student. Jack is too old to know English well but is old enough to have gleaned lasting impressions of American culture in the 1950s and 60s, and when he saw a sign on one of those beachfront Ft. Lauderdale bars that said, "No Coolers Allowed" you'll never guess what he thought it meant.

~

One of my distant cousins, who is smart enough to work for an oil company, has sent me some letters from Nigeria. So I looked up Lagos on the Internet. And in the process, I stumbled across some newspapers that weren't printed in the United States. If you are an international traveler you know how interesting foreign newspapers can be. You can read about little insignificant things that aren't important enough to get into the *Wall Street Journal*. According to one foreign newspaper, the Pentagon is investigating some United States company that was billing the army for cleaning some offices up to four times per day. I've lived with Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, for sixteen or so years, so I don't see anything unusual about cleaning an office four times a day. Would you dare stand up at town meeting and say that the brave men who are defending our country don't deserve clean offices? You'd be putting your patriotism on the line. Should any American company be suspected of criminal activity just because they bill the army for cleaning an office four times a day? Our present system depends on this kind of thing. Where else would all that political campaign money come from?

~

Do you listen to language tapes? I spent half an hour this morning listening to my French tapes. I walk at the same time so as to do two things at once. My best friend, who is rich, gave me the nice little rich kid CD player that I carry around my neck in a little cloth bag so I can listen to French. But if he were to see me walking and listening to French, he would say, "How much money did it make you?" No matter what I do he always says that. How much money did it make you? And he is right. He is rich because everything he has done all his life has been geared to making money. He has been the ant who has worked hard all his life and succeeded, and I have been the grasshopper who wasted nine years of his life going to college, studying literature and history and languages, which is absolutely worthless if your IQ is low and you live in St. George, Maine. Studying history is especially worthless, because every time you read the news you see governments still doing the same unfortunate things they've been doing since history began—trying to take something away from somebody else. And studying languages is a rich man's hobby. Forty-five years ago I might have rationalized the need of knowing many languages, because om man kan snakka norsk, det hjalpa att traffa Norsk piga. Forty-five years ago it helped me pick up Norwegian girls. But of what use are several languages to a doddering sixty-eight year old man? The only thing I need to say now in French is je suee fatigay.

~

Here's news. Uganda Becomes World's sixth Smokefree Workplace. Uganda has eliminated tobacco smoke pollution in all workplaces and public places, including restaurants, educational institutions and bars. Uganda joins Ireland, Sweden, Norway, New Zealand, and Bhutan among the world's first smoke free workplace countries. Uganda? If I lived in Uganda I'd be saying to myself, "What's the matter with Uganda? Why has the tobacco lobby forsaken us? Aren't we worth bothering with? Are we too poor to buy cigarettes in the first place?" In Nigeria everyone understands that they want a thick smoky haze in bars so you can't identify the gunman who robbed you. But that shouldn't apply in most of the United States. If you can figure out how they were able to squeeze smoke free legislation by the tobacco lobby in Uganda and Bhutan and still can't do it in the United States, a lot of people would like to know how they did it.

~

How do you feel when immigration quotas are raised so that your town can be flooded with kids who are willing to work for rock bottom wages? If you have a payroll—of you own a hotel or motel or restaurant you prob-

ably think it is pretty nice. If I were looking for someone who would rake away the rocks the snowplow put on my lawn and pick my apples in the fall, I'd think that importing this cheap child labor was an absolute necessity. If you are a local someone who has been doing these very necessary chores and think that you should keep your job and even get a raise for doing it, you're not going to be happy.

If you have your ear to the ground you have heard two boo hoo stories. One is a big boo-hoo from hotels and motels and restaurants that claim they can't find people to wash dishes and make beds. The other boo-hoo is that so and so and a few of her friends who were washing dishes and making beds at the big resort got fired so they could be replaced by cheap imported child labor.

That's what I heard and I can't say a thing about it, one way or the other. But if it weren't for people willing to come here and work cheap, cheap, cheap, my great grandfather William Williamson would probably have stayed in Arberdeen, Scotland, my father would have probably stayed in Boras, Sweden, and I wouldn't have gone to school in St. George, Maine with dozens of kids who taught me to say, "Mitta Kulu, A playa mitta. Huvva." Listen closely. Knowing what I know now, if I were fifty years younger *I'd* be washing dishes for slaves wages in Marselles, Rome, Athens, Oslo, Koblinz, Smogen, Fungerola, Vilnius, and Rovaneimi, and I wouldn't even come home to start college until I was twenty-seven, had learned a bit about people, and could speak eight or ten languages.

~

Did you ever realize that everything is relative? If you go to Fort Kent, you are in just about the coldest, most miserable northernmost point in Maine. But if you simply cross the river, you are in just about the warmest, most pleasant southernmost point in Canada.

~

You might have heard a poem that contains the words, "When a man gets old." Perhaps it's a book. When a man gets old, things that never used to work right continue to run down. I have had hearing aids for a few years, but in some situations I figure I'm guessing at thirty percent of the English language. At the Grange, where acoustics are bad, I sometimes don't hear anything at all.

I have recently been haunting the Penobscot Language School in Rockland. You should check out The Penobscot School on the web and drop by at least once just for fun. Every noon several friends sit around a table and munch lettuce leaves and granola as they converse in French, Spanish, German or Italian. Although no English is allowed around the sacred dinner table, I did ask someone a question in English in another part of the building, and when she replied, I couldn't figure out if she

were speaking French or Italian or what it was because I couldn't understand a word of it. I finally got right up close to her and asked her where she was born, and looked at her lips so I could semi-read her answer, and she said, "Houston."

Houston, we have a problem. It is with my hearing. You have heard me say many times on this program that the first sentence anyone should learn to say in a foreign language is, "My friend will pay." Now I am convinced that the second sentence anyone learns in a foreign language should be, "We are all friends here. There is no need to whisper."

~

At the risk of sounding un-American, I'd like to learn to say and understand a few simple things in French and German. Please remember that because the brain contains several compartments that do not seem to be connected, the ability to read another language does not mean that you can speak it or understand simple conversation. As far as I know, anyone is welcome to show up at noon at the Penobscot School in Rockland, munch lettuce leaves or granola while seated around a dinner table, and listen to one person, usually an American, speak French or German non stop for an hour. Their words are sometimes punctuated by grunts of agreement by the others in attendance.

The other day I was one of the only two people there, so I got to not only contribute my grunts, but to also articulate my sentiments. This is what I learned. Did you see that ram they made to test the safety of side airbags in little cars? The ram is as high as the bumper on those big black station wagon cars that you always see the bad CIA guys driving in Mel Gibson movies. I think they call them SUVs. The great big simulated SUV bumper hits the little car broadside—at only thirty miles per hour, the side airbag drops down, and the dummy flops around inside with a simulated broken neck. Some little cars survive better than others. The man on TV said that little car makers have got to beef up the amount of steel or structural support so passengers in little cars can survive being hit broadside by an SUV that has run a red light. Wouldn't it make more sense to outlaw SUVs? Sehr schlim, oder?

~

Here's a letter from computer guru and radio friend John in Nova Scotia: Dear humble, The Japanese eat very little fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than the British or Americans.

Contrarily, the French have lots of fat in their diets and also suffer fewer heart attacks than either the British or Americans.

Conclusion: Eat whatever you want. It's speaking English that kills you.

~

Will you give me your opinion on kids running off to Europe for five or six years before they go to college? I went to college until I was thirty-four, and for years I advised kids to get their doctorates before they were thirty. But—over the past year, I've been thinking that if I had it to do over, I'd work as a slave in eight or ten countries, six months in each one, before going to college. While I was picking up a new language, I'd learn how to repair washing machines and electric motors. I'd learn how to fix computers and automobile transmissions. Then I'd go to college with ten or so cultures and languages and a dozen practical skills under my belt that one could use when the inevitable planned recessions—the planned recessions that employers have to have to break unions and keep wages down—you could use these skills when recessions put speakers and the other arts out of business.

My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, spent her junior high school year in Chile. When I flunked out of music school I spent six months in Sweden. Anyway, what do you think about this? Do you think your kids should get his or her doctorate before they are thirty, or should they live in eight or ten countries and learn languages, other cultures and a dozen or so useful trades before they even start?

Last week I spoke to some kids in Augusta who just got what I think is a high school equivalency degree. One girl was going study in Italy and I was delighted, because it gave me a chance to say what I had already planned to say. But while thinking about this on the way up to Augusta, I realized that because I am sixty-eight, I had forgotten one important thing that messes up all normal people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-six, and that is the juices that simmer and boil. I had forgotten how much time a young man can waste in Sweden, just standing outside of a window and wondering if her regular boyfriend from Finland, the one with a knife, is already in there.

~

Loren Ek called from Las Vegas and talked about Guatemala. Here is what I typed as he talked. Is Guatemala safe? Yes, it's safe except for the armed bandits that stop busses. Guatemala City is very dangerous. Buses are stopped by armed bandits in the middle of the city. They might only get $50 off the whole bus because people are so poor. El Salvador. San Salvador. Razor wire and armed guards everywhere. The week after we were there they robbed a bus. They've got a pretty good president now. No civil war. Just bandits. Thousands of people who were conscripted when they were twelve years old. They can't read but they can use an AK 47, so when the war is over there is big unemployment, they either work as security guards around houses and businesses or they rob the houses and businesses. Razor wire around the houses and armed guards. Half the people are guards and the other half are the bandits. Some guards

and police moonlight. I wouldn't go back to Colombia on a bet. They kidnap gringos and hold them for $250,000 or half a million dollars. They like oil executives. That is a big industry. You've got hundreds of thousands of narco guerras who protect the narco trade. They claim to be upholding peasants' rights. One third of Colombia is not under the control of the government. It would be cheaper if the US government were to buy the crop from the peasants. Ninety percent of the money goes to the traffickers.

So much for the phone call from Loren Ek.

You heard the obvious reference as to how we could eliminate unemployment in areas where people don't have jobs. The unemployed could meet in a big hall. The moderator would ask the people who wanted to be security guards to stand and move to the left of the hall. The people who wanted to be the bandits would be asked to stand and move to the right of the hall. It would then be agreed that the following night the bandits would break into half the houses in town and carry off an armload. In the morning the guards would offer their services to any property owners who didn't want to be robbed on a regular basis.

You are absolutely right. This system wouldn't really do all that much to provide meaningful employment.

But—you're like my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, in that you have jumped to a false conclusion before I've finished what I was saying. The real benefit in this system would be realized when the government set up a new agency and hired thousands of people to study the problem we have just created.

~ Foreign Travel ~

Here's a letter from a Hollywood friend of mine who makes movies. Hear this letter: "Cannes was crazy as usual and, had we not been robbed, we'd be in a much more cheerful state. After over thirty years of safe international travel, our sidebag was stolen from the screening room at the Palais du Festival during one of our own screenings. They got everything from our passports and money, to all his credit cards, drivers license and the rental car keys." End of quote.

So. Are you surprised to hear that all these bad things happened to a genius who is an experienced international traveler? I am not. But I would be very surprised to hear that it happened to a Maine hick who happened to be stumbling around in Cannes. Because when a Maine hick goes to Cannes, his passport, his $35 for unforeseen expenses, and his only credit card are fastened to his body with duct tape. And they are secured in a mysterious place that even his wife has never seen.

A Maine hick carries everything he will need in one tiny green cloth knapsack that has a top held on with safety pins and it is in his hands when he gets on the airplane and it is in his hands when he returns to America two or four weeks later. I have gone into hotels in Morocco where they wanted my passport to put up in a little nest of mailboxes behind the counter. You must be kidding, mister.

You've heard me tell about hearing the running footsteps coming up behind us late one night in Casablanca. When I heard the switchblade click open, I hit the foot stepper beside the head with my friend's suitcase. This has nothing to do with bravery or quick thinking. It has to do with years of working and playing in fields on the farm. When a Maine man feels hornets flying up both pant legs he doesn't stand around picking his nose while he figures out what to do. City boys have no idea what I'm talking about here. At an early age city boys are told, "Smile and give the robber what he wants." Rural Maine boys swat bees. What do you do to keep sticky fingers out of your pockets when you travel?

~

I promised to tell you about one more thing that I saw in Spain five years ago. Some men were painting white lines on a city street. To do so, they blocked off the street and put up a NO ENTRY sign right where the traffic split to go around a monument. The sign was very clear, but there was room to sneak out around it and go around the monument. Many drivers did, but these men who were painting had obviously done this before. On the other side of the monument they actually blockaded the road with their own cars. So everyone who drove around the NO ENTRY sign had no choice but to continue around the rotary and go back out the way they came in.

Living out in the country like I do, I looked at this with a different perspective than someone raised in the city. I know that a little furry animal is not likely to go into a trap if he can't see all the way through to the other side. Which indicates to me that it would be more difficult to trap skunks than Europeans.

~

My house guest Dan from Boston mentioned that the Kenyans did not win the Marathon at the Olympics. I asked him how this could happen, and he said that it was because there was no prize money. If you have another answer please let me know.

~

Did I mention that when I was up in Presque Isle I met Tim, who listens to this program? It was great talking with Tim. It's always great to talk with you. I love to meet you. Love to know what you do and how long you've been doing it. You will remember that I always ask you for the funniest or the most horrible thing that ever happened to you while you were working. I also want to know the most useful thing you can tell me. What can you tell me that will save me from making the same stupid mistake that you did? We talk a lot about that on this program. I try to come up with scraps of information that will save you grief.

Up in Presque Isle Tim told me that he learned Spanish while working at the customs station in El Paso. I said, "Lemme hear some," and Tim rattled off some Spanish that I couldn't quite understand. So I said, "What does that mean?" And he said, "Do you have any drugs in your truck?"

~

I have looked on the Internet but can't find it. Someone told me that when Tolkien held court with his friends at Oxford, a group called the Inklings, they would draw languages out of a hat to determine which language they would speak that day. But I can't find it. I did read that

Tolkien had an exceptional gift for languages and had mastered Latin, Greek, Old English, the Germanic Languages (including Gothic), Welsh and Finnish. My hero. You probably remember my telling you about the time I saw a man buying a Greek book in a Camden bookstore. And because I'm a very nosey and sociable person I mentioned to him that there weren't all that many people in Camden who could read Greek. But it reminded me that when I got out of bed that morning I saw on my bedside stand a book in French, a book in Spanish, a book in Swedish and a book in Dutch. And he said, "My word, who were you sleeping with?"

~

You probably know by now that one of my favorite topics is taboos. Parents: If you have young children you may want to turn off your radio. You should know that this part of the program contains words that should not be said—in France. In France there is a list of 3,500 foreign words that can't be used. They include the words cheeseburger, stress, bulldozer, brainstorming, air bag and log on. This from the country that originated the term: Le Jazz Hot. In Turkey, the word cool is banned. I wish it had been banned here twenty years ago, along with "like."

~

I am studying French because French is a very important language—to the French. Did you know that there are only two places on this green earth where the natives do not speak at least a word or two of English? One of those places is a tiny village of tree houses in a rain forest in New Guinea where the men carry spears and wear a bone in their nose, and the other place is France. And every time I go to France I am frustrated because there isn't a man, woman or child there who will speak a word of English. I can't get a room in France, I can't get anything to eat, I can't find out where anything is. So I am learning French.

Being a cosmopolitan, you already know that you don't take no for an answer in France. If you come into a restaurant and say you want the table over by the window, and they say that it's reserved for the President, you say I am the president, and you go over there and sit down. I don't see what difference it makes what you say in France if you're simply going to go over and sit at the president's table anyway.

You might know that all sounds in languages are wonderful. But there is only one sound in French and it is produced with the nose. Difference in meaning is conveyed by the way you wave your arms.

I told my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, that I couldn't remember the French word for money. She said, "I think it's moolah." Please make note of this because I'm about to tell you the most important sentence every young man needs to know in any language. It is, "My friend will pay."

~

And now a public service announcement. As you know, I love languages. I was stumped by "fulgurating" in a French book, looked up fulgurating, found it is the same in English, and now I can't understand why I never heard anyone use it on Monhegan. I've also been studying Dutch for years, and I have made myself Dutch flash cards. One day I looked at the word D-E-C-I-D-E on a card, and I said, "What a funny word. Deesiddy." And then I realized that it wasn't Dutch. I was looking at the English side of the card.

You know, if your mind is not fully aware of what your eyes are looking at, it can distort what you see. Try to remember the foremost thing on your mind when you were young and then take another good look at that nice little boy who visits your daughter.

~

You know that every Tuesday noon a few people get together at the Penobscot School in Rockland to talk French. Most Americans would find French a very hard language to understand, because the French only pronounce half of their words. But, because I am deaf, I only hear half the words in any language, so I don't realize that the French mumble—I think it's me. I think I'm not hearing all of the letters in the word because I'm deaf.

Anyway, I'm sitting there, trying very hard to hear French the other day, when I think I heard a woman say that a teacher she had in school wore the same suit every day. My initial impression was, "Wow, does anybody notice what anybody else wears?—Does it make any difference what anybody else wears?—Does anybody care what anybody else wears?"

But then I got to thinking that it must be a woman thing, because when we were on our way to the Lotus Restaurant in Camden to celebrate New Year's Eve, my wife Marsha looked me up and down and said, "Robert, why must you always dress so shabby?"

And I said, "Clothes don't amount to nothing. It's the body underneath that counts."

And she said, "Oh, don't make it any worse than it already is."

~

Are you a hot person or a cold person? I am a cold person. You see me running around in a snowmobile suit from October until May with my woolly hat pulled down over my ears because my heart doesn't beat fast enough to keep me warm. My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, is a hot person. She is always hot. Sometimes I come to the supper table

with my snowmobile suit and woolly hat on, because she would be hot if we turned up the dining room heat enough for me to be comfortable.

Marsha's oldest daughter, Alison, is not like her mother. Alison is a cold person. Alison always has cold hands. In the winter Alison could not get the heat in our house cranked up high enough to stay warm. Alison even had an electric heater in her bedroom. If anyone in your house ever plugs in an electric heater, you probably know that most of the heat is generated outside your house in the meter box. Plug in an electric heater in your house, and that dial in your meter box spins until it practically starts smoking.

If you are the person who pays the electric bill at your house, you probably notice these things. Kids don't notice these things. Heating bills are nothing to a kid in high school or college.

But last September Alison married Aaron. You might remember me telling how nice it was to have Aaron around when I was putting up sheet rock in the new back porch—Aaron can put the palms of his hands on an eight foot ceiling.

And you might know that people change when they get married. Alison changed. My wife Marsha spent a night with Alison last week. Now Marsha knows what it's like to have to wear a snowmobile suit to the supper table, because now that Alison is paying her own heating bills, she keeps her house at 48 degrees.

If your kid recently moved into his or her own home, you will not be surprised to hear that Marsha said, "I'm glad to be home. I almost froze to death last night."

~

You probably know about the Penobscot Language School on Gay Street in Rockland. On Monday you can take a sandwich in there at noon and sit around a table with several friends, eating your sandwich while you talk French. On Tuesday you can take a sandwich in there at noon and sit around a table eating your sandwich while your friends talk Spanish. On Wednesday it is the same thing with German. Thursday I think it's Italian. No English is allowed, and there is usually at least one native speaker there who guides the discussion while eating a tortilla, pom fritts or bockworst, whichever day it might be. If you're like me and can't speak Spanish, French or German, but get a great deal of satisfaction by being able to understand some of it, you can simply quietly munch on a carrot and listen.

The Penobscot School is a great asset to our area. I'm there three times a week when I can make it. Noon until one. Everyone interested in languages should avail himself or herself of this great learning opportunity.

There is only one disadvantage to the present dinnertime program as I see it, and I don't even dare mention it to the people at the school for fear of hurting someone's feelings. Remember what I said about all the conversations taking place while people are eating? When I get to Europe I'm not going to be able to understand Spanish, French or German unless they have a mouth full of tofu.

~

My friend David wrote to me about an Englishman who built a trebuchet —that's one of those big throwing machines that can be cocked by pulling the arm into place with a tractor. It is capable of throwing a dead horse or a piano some considerable distance. One use for siege engines in the Middle Ages was to project festering carcasses into the besieged town in order to start an epidemic. David calls this—prototypical biological warfare.

Can you imagine hurling a festering carcass at your enemies? When I asked my friend Richard Warner of a modern equivalent he said, "Uninvited guests who drop in."

~

I'm trying to eat dinner when Bill tossed his newspaper at me. Bill is The Almost Perfect Woman's father. He lives in that little back room I built on the house. He says, "Look at that story about the survivalists." You probably know that the Survivalists are people who are doing a Robinson Caruso thing on some island for TV. From what I read, a lot of people watch it. But now the animal rights crowd is complaining because some of these survivalists are eating rats.

But, hey, you do what you've got to do to survive. I gave a Russian physicist a ride to Thomaston the other day in my Model T. She told me that she survived Leningrad. I didn't ask her if she ate rats, but from what I have heard, hungry people in Leningrad were known to eat worse things than that.

Far as I'm concerned, people can go over in the corner, and as long as they don't bother me, they can eat anything they want. And, on the other side of the coin, as far as I'm concerned—this is a free country—you can protest all you want about people eating rats. But—you come around here protesting about people eating lobsters—and a lot of us are going to get ugly.

If you've ever been to Sweden in the summer time, the temperature might have been around fifty degrees and you might have experienced a very light rain in a thirty mile an hour wind. That's what we encountered in Smögen last week.

I'm never disappointed by July weather in Sweden, because I know enough to wear two pair of pants, a woolly hat and long johns. But even

Swedes get tired of their climate. How else can you explain why such a friendly, kind and intelligent group of people put on crazy looking helmets and sailed down to Greece to ravish the countryside? Even 1200 years ago, Swedes would do anything for a week of sunshine.

~

Did I remember to tell you about our trip to Israel in March? My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, and I no sooner drove our rental car out of the airport at Tel Aviv, when Marsha said, "Israel must really be a safe country. Look at that young girl out there hitchhiking all alone."

I said, "My dear, that thing over her shoulder is a uzzi submachine gun."

~

You probably know that most any Millionaire program on TV gets top ratings. For some reason, the thought of getting something for nothing appeals to many people.

So, how would you like to be adopted by a nice woman so rich that she has houses in Morocco, Paris, Japan, Mexico, Colorado and who knows where else? What? If she wanted to adopt you, you wouldn't care if she were nice or not? Here's the story. Lonely girl working in all-night gas station. Feels bad for a Japanese boy who is working there and takes care of him for three weeks. Japanese boy is grateful, and writes to his mother about this generous girl. Mama San decides to adopt the girl because her own daughter recently died. You guessed it. This family is one of the most famous and richest in Japan. The boy wasted money at his first year at college, and he now has to work to prove that he is worthy of his family. Girl gets passport and prepares to quit job and learn how to manage great wealth.

There's more, but you have heard enough.

This story is true. The girl thinks she is going to be rich in a month or two. Now—before you laugh, consider that there are two sides to this story. One might argue that Mama San knows that her son needs a level-headed, kind and thoughtful keeper. If you are rich and have a worthless son or daughter, you know you'd give anything to make the kid responsible.

On the other hand, there are liars out there who could talk the robe off a judge. Place your bets now, then ask me next month and I'll tell you how it turned out.

~

Did you know that every Monday you can listen to a conversation in Spanish from noon until 1 at the Penobscot School on Gay Street in Rockland? People bring in a sandwich and sit around a table eating and jabbering Spanish. I try to be there every week. The conversation might be anything that comes to mind. Last week some woman told a story about her friend who was wearing a very short mini skirt in one of those middle eastern countries. She said that people threw stones at her.

We've all seen legs like that in Rockland, but most of us have learned to control ourselves.

~

Last week, while at that dinner where Americans speak only French, some woman was telling about what she had eaten in Paris over the Christmas holidays. I didn't understand much of it until she said, "ordurves." Where would the French be if they couldn't borrow an occasional American word?

~

Captain Jim Sharp came back from Peru and said that down there they cut the pockets right out of your pants to get what's inside. Either there is a good school for it there or there is a lot of native ability.

~

In Australia you don't have to wear a seat belt if you're over seventy. This is their way of alleviating some of the burden on Social Security.

~

It was refreshing to hear that the London man who robbed that woman last week was well dressed. He pushed open the door to her room, slammed her around, tore out the telephone and took purses and cameras.

This is a great change from the old raggedy Fagan image that's been popularized on stage and screen. It seems to indicate that everybody's standard of living has improved.

~

I have in my hand a letter from Nigeria. It is dated September 30. The envelope it came in is postmarked July 30. Africa would appear to be one of the few places remaining in the world where they can mail a letter two months before they write it. The letter is from poorly paid civil servants who invite me to participate in an international business transaction.

Can you imagine a man who has paid $2,900 of income taxes in his entire life being invited to participate in an international business deal? There are millions of people in the United States who would like to get in on this, and they chose me. It knocked me off my feet. These enterprising fellows are about to steal $30 million from their government and want me to call or fax them so that they can deposit the $30 million in my bank account. My share will come to $10 million.

Now you can probably see that this is the chance of a lifetime. So it might surprise you to hear that I'm going to pass on it. I'm too old to start a new career in international business. I wouldn't even know how to spend $10 million. I'd be like the guy in Union who won six million dollars in the lottery. The minute he got that cash in his hands, he rushed over to the John Deere place and bought two gallons of tractor paint.

~

Have you noticed that in books people raise their eyebrows or shrug their shoulders? I read a lot of Harlequin Romances in French and Dutch and even paperback books in Swedish and Norwegian. And all of them have this one thing in common: the raising of the eyebrow or the shrugging of a shoulder. Why don't they ever bite their fingernails? When I write a book people are going to stick fingers in ears. They are going to stick fingers everywhere.

~ Experience
A Full Game Situation ~

My psychologist friend Addler doesn't care for bright, sunny days. The last time I was in his office he flopped on his couch, bit his nails, and expounded on the potential profits in fog, cold and drizzle.

"I'll take overcast and an eighty percent chance of showers any day," he cried. "My business is dependent upon goose pimpled arms and a miserable runny nose. That's when complete persons withdraw deep into themselves, trusting that introspection will reveal a cohesive, holistic meaning of life."

I pretended to understand and said, "That sounds depressing."

"It is. Nothing generates emotional turmoil like an honest search for inner tranquility. On any given rainy week I can take in six new patients. Usually they're crushed with guilt for having money enough to jet to Mexico while their poor friends have to dig in here and suffer. It's a terrible thing to have more money than you can comfortably spend."

"That's where you can help."

"Right. The microcosmic redistribution of wealth is my specialty. Unfortunately, although I'm expensive I'm also very good at what I do—my patients are always getting better and leaving me. To be completely honest with you, sixteen hours of daylight filled with warm sunshine also moves the recovery along at a breathtaking pace. And, as I said, there's seldom a new patient at the door when the weather is good."

"I wonder—given a choice between a summer of beach picnics or intensive hour-long gut spilling sessions with you—which would I do?"

Addler bolted upright on the couch. His beanie with the propeller on top tumbled to the floor.

"Why would you need professional help?" he laughed. "As long as I've known you you've been trying to claw yourself up into that class of people

that can afford egos. I have yet to meet a man two months behind on his house payments who bragged that he was a complete person trying to find himself."

"So business slacks off in the summer," I said quickly. "Have you ever thought of getting out there and knocking on doors? I mean, if you'd read the local paper to find out what's going on in the community and then talk with people until they let their guards down and confess their worries, things might brighten up for you—even on the nicest days."

Addler pulled a sheaf of papers from a shelf on the wall and said, "If there is any hope for me this summer it lies in education. I've helped write the curriculum guide for our softball education program over at the school. After months of evaluating the latest available criteria, most of us agreed that students should develop a level of physical fitness commensurate with their individual capacities."

I said, "Don't forget—each kid should also do as much as she or he is capable of doing."

"Listen to these objectives. The concept is Softball. 'Students will understand equipment used: bats, balls, playing field, gloves, bases. Students will understand infield and outfield positions. They will learn the proper mechanics of throwing and batting: stance, swing, overhand, underhand, sidearm.'"

"I suppose it would be impossible to teach softball without a written curriculum guide to file with the state department of education," I mumbled.

My friend was trembling like a father holding his first child. He lowered his voice before continuing in a reverent tone: "How's this for a suggested learning activity?—'Students will experience a Full Game situation.' It's on the playing field that tomorrow's financial giants learn the value of teamwork."

I couldn't disagree with that. Everyone knows that the most successful safe cracking gang in France had used the same locker room in high school.

~ News ~

The four rock climbers rescued from the south side of mount Katahdin, where they had been hanging by ropes since last fall, are weak but in good health. A fifth member of the climbing party, whom they had counted on to help them get down, left them hanging there last September and came home to run for the legislature.

~

According to a think tank at Harvard, within 200 years sexual harassment will not exist in the work place. This is because if present programs are one hundred percent successful, there won't be anyone around in 200 years.

~

According to a newspaper report, someone cooked a piece of meat in Bar Harbor last week. It is the first meat to be cooked there since Memorial Day of 1983 when the hippies officially took over.

~

A Maine man, who had decided to leave his fifty plus acres of prime wooded shore property to a land trust, was using his chainsaw to trim up fallen trees down by the water. His neighbor, who was more than casually involved with the environmental movement, noticed the activity and reported the man with the saw for illegally sawing trees by the shore.

The property owner has since decided to give the land to the Micmac Indians, with the stipulation that they use the site for a gambling casino.

~

A quick look at the court record in the newspaper reveals even more about the world we live in. Out of twenty-two people listed, sixteen of them were not yet thirty. Only one of the twenty-two was over forty. These twenty-two people were convicted of drug use, drunken driving,

assault, theft and forgetfulness. Yes, forgetfulness. The one person over forty whose name was posted in the newspaper with the drunken drivers, thieves, druggies and bullies had forgotten to register his car.

~

Dogs are in the news this week. Everyone loves dogs. They're great companions for your kids.

Last week's greyhound show up in the Augusta area was well attended. There was even a little eight pound Italian greyhound there. Cutest little thing. Everyone enjoyed picking it up and cuddling it. There was also a big greyhound there who had been trained in Europe to chase live game. Of course, that kind of thing is not allowed in this country. And that big greyhound thought that little greyhound was a rabbit. We all feel sorry.

But at least, it wasn't a child. An Augusta woman was trying to get her dog—not a greyhound but one of those big black dogs that the Chinese use to bring down bears—she was trying to get her dog to like children by getting her grandson to feed it. We feel bad for the kid, but realize that if it weren't for people who do unique things like that, there would be nothing but the horoscope and tide tables in the daily newspaper.

~ The humble Farmer's Survival of the Fittest ~

Without productive, culturally-transmitted language, the proliferation of human culture as a whole would never have taken place.

But how did language ever start? For years linguists advanced theories that would account for this singular human phenomenon.

We have the ding dong theory, that is, that there is a mystic harmony that exists between sound and meaning. Man was able to give a vocal expression to every external impression. And we have the bow wow theory. That is, that man created language by imitating the sounds of animals.

Others believe that man acquired language as the result of evolutionary changes in the structure of his mind.

Now, I would like to advance the even more plausible itch theory. That is, that language evolved out of necessity when a man needed to tell his wife where to scratch his back. The first words ever spoken, were probably, "Up, up, over, no, the other way to the right, to the right, up, down just a bit, yah, yah right there. Go round and round right there."

~

Have you noticed that TV news people like Joe Cupo, Cindy Williams, Pat Callihan and Jennifer Rooks are more than human? I have never seen one of them scratch. Don't they ever itch? Watch them closely. When they are not rattling a sheaf of papers, they sit with folded hands. You have seen David Letterman rub his nose or his ear from time to time. But most professional TV people sit like grade school kids who have been told that they can't go out for recess until everyone is sitting up quietly. Por que es eso? "One thing for which there is no match, is when you itch to up and scratch. On the back of our chairs let our shoulder blades rub, let the drawing room now be as free as the tub." Ogden Nash.

~

When it was ten below zero I watched a lot of television and listened to the nails in the walls going off like firecrackers. Ten below will do that. On television I saw a movie star who had apparently said something bad about a weasel and he got hundreds of emails from weasel lovers saying what an ignorant rat fink he was. Why are people so defensive about their pets? You can understand you don't want people saying unkind things about your wife or your mother—even if they might be true. But why should a true observation about the uselessness of your pet raise your hackles? You know that I have three wonderful pets, but wouldn't it be a compliment if someone said to me, "Robert, you can't believe how I'd like to slice up your pet on my dinner plate." If someone were to tell me that my pets are about as useful as a stiff elbow should I get all defensive and point out how they graze quietly in the assigned areas—generating a pastoral ambiance while holding back the relentless and ever encroaching Maine forest?

~

Years ago in a course called psycholinguistics at the University of Rochester I was given a rat to train so I know that people can get attached to furry little animals. My rat Vilkus, which as you know means wolf in Lithuanian, was a true rat and it didn't bother me to have Vilkus rat sit on my shoulder or crawl down inside the sleeve of my sport jacket. One time Jack Neubig was building me a fireplace and Jack was sitting across the table from me eating his dinner. Jack was from Friendship and just about as tough as any mason you'd find anywhere. I went in the other room and put Vilkus rat down inside my sleeve, came back in and sat down at the table. And when Vilkus rat stuck his head out of my sleeve at the dinner table and wiggled his nose and smiled with his big yellow teeth—well, Jack said it was the worst thing he had ever seen in his life. You might have seen that famous movie star on TV try to make up to his distressed public by kissing a weasel right there on camera. But I've never seen even a rat that was worthy of my lips. How about you?

~

It has been estimated by the advertising community that if each woman in America gained only twenty pounds, they could sell an extra two billion dollars worth of cloth each year. Profits are expected to double in beer and spaghetti.

Dry skin, which was invented by Al Peel in the 1950s, will still be promoted, however. Thanks to Al, women all over the country have discovered their dry skin. They now spend billions on creams, salves and

lotions to keep their skin moist. Maine men don't want their wives to have moist skin. Up here we call it sweat.

~

Thirty or so years ago when I was in graduate school studying linguistics at the University of Rochester, I was forced to buy several books on generative grammar that were written by the linguistic guru Noam Chomsky. I went to school hoping to learn useless fun things like how to read Greek and Old Icelandic and Latin, so Chomsky's books didn't interest me. On top of that, I couldn't understand any of them. They were just about as interesting as a chemistry textbook or section forty-seven from the fourth edition of Prosser on Torts. Only a genius could read and claim to understand Chomsky's books on generative grammar. Because I'd heard so much about Chomsky when I was a child in graduate school, I recently opened my ears and paid close attention when I ran across him while clicking through the channels—just to see what he was up to nowadays. Chomsky has apparently used his encyclopedic mind to become a very astute social commentator and he was taking questions about his *Hegemony or Survival* book from an international crowd of journalists—the Tim Russerts from all over the globe. These are people who know what is going on in the world and who write about it in dozens of languages. And when Chomsky finished they gave him a medal for—I think it was for speaking out or having a social conscience for mankind. You might not believe this, but I can now understand Chomsky—perhaps because he is finally saying something that I already know.

~

I once read about a mother, who was playing with her three year old. She asked, "What sound does a cow make?"

And the kid said, "Moooo."

"What sound does the doggie make?"

"Woof, woof."

"What sound does the froggie make?"

And when the kid said, "Budweiser," she knew it was time to switch to PBS.

~

You might have heard that Congress is holding investigations because something that children shouldn't see recently flopped out on several million TV screens. Congress is going to put a stop to the incessant amount of sex and violence we see on television. I don't know about you, but I'll miss the evening news.

~

I just bought a book called *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. It is a book written by a very good and talented man whose name was Arnold Lobel and I bought it because I recall enjoying *Frog and Toad Are Friends* back when I was very young, probably in my mid thirties. But now, thirty years later and hopefully a more discriminating reader, I found a couple of disturbing things. To get an exhausted Toad out of bed after only half a winter's nap, Frog tears the February, March and April pages off Toad's calendar. Seeing May on his calendar Toad thinks that spring has arrived, gets out of bed, and goes for a walk with the crafty Frog. The message to young people is clear: if your friends will not listen to reason, you can get your own way by employing deceit. Not that Toad himself would be able to cast the first stone, because when he couldn't find his button he jumped up and down and screamed. Do you want your youngsters to learn that a temper tantrum is an acceptable response to frustration? However, on the positive side of *Frog and Toad Are Friends*, your children will preview the shameful reality we live with in the United States today, because when Frog mailed his next door neighbor a letter, Toad didn't get it until four days later.

~

Do you bother to read your kid's report card? There are a dozen or so printed comments the teacher can choose to check off: "He is not trying,"—"She is not doing her homework." One of my friends told me the comment his son brings home the most is, "He is a delight to have in class." He says it kind of worries him, as it is obviously not the same kid he has at home.

~

You've heard about body language—that you can tell what a person is thinking by the way they stand. The body language experts will tell you that anyone who has his arms folded across his chest is aloof and uncommunicative. That might be true in Boston, but on the street in Rockland, Maine it could mean that you slopped clam chowder on your sweater.

~

Did you hear Tom Brokaw telling about the poor kids in Afghanistan who have no running water or indoor plumbing in their school? Did tears run down your cheeks for these unfortunates until it loosened the floor tiles in your trailer? On my webpage under "Pictures of you at shows" you can see where I went to school. And even though I went to a school that had neither indoor plumbing nor running water, it didn't keep me from representing Harvard and MIT at an international convention of linguists in Romania. Unless you count my inability to remember your name and recognize your face, I can function in society. In 1941 the oldest boy in that

one room school was Tommy Baum, who was a grandson of one of my third cousins. I can remember seeing Tommy sitting up back trying to keep a teddy bear in the air by batting it with a ruler. And going to a school that didn't have running water didn't keep Tommy from being president of that great huge Pratt and Whitney plant in South Berwick. As a matter of fact, when I spoke at Tommy's Pratt & Whitney retirement party I mentioned that going to a one room school actually honed Tommy's administrative skills. It taught him how to run meetings. Because in January, when Tommy went into that little unheated back room that was attached to the school, he knew why he was going in there. And when he did get in there he didn't waste any time attending to the business at hand and getting back out again.

~

Did you attend a school that didn't have running water? Do you remember days in November when boys might bring a shotgun or a pistol to school? Do you remember wearing your father's cut down dress pants to school? Do you remember how cleverly you covered the hole in your shoe with a piece of tin because cardboard got wet and fell apart? And you weren't even one of the poor kids. Do you remember when showing high school students a multi reel movie like *Song of Bernadette* or *Our Miss Brooks* was a big once a year deal? We thought we got to see the life of Stephen Foster because the teacher didn't know that Foster was a drunk who came to a bad end. Years later we realized that was the only reason he showed it. Do you remember when a trim little twenty year old English teacher could keep a seventeen year old high school boy out all night without seeing herself on the evening news? Do you remember when mothers still mended socks? Do you remember that before you had an icebox your grandmother kept the milk and butter down cellar where it was cool? Do you remember seeing your grandmother fry doughnuts in a big back kettle of grease over a wood stove? Do you remember those hard molasses cookies she kept in that round tin can in the cellar way? Do you remember putting your hand on the big round water tank behind the stove to see if the water was hot enough to take a bath? Do you remember when you had to go next door to see a telephone? And when you finally got yours the bell worked on a generator and even your mother couldn't crank it fast enough to make it ring right. Do you remember the first time you made a phone call? And the first words you said? Do you remember that every time you'd pick up the phone, one of your neighbors would probably be on the line? And from time to time some neighbor, who was listening in on your conversation, would get so excited that without thinking she'd but right in.—Tell you what really happened. Do you remember when your father put a white receptacle in your bathroom that saved you the trip out to that little unheated room on the back of the shed? Do you remember getting on a train to go see your father who was working in the shipyard in Freeport or Boothbay Harbor? Do you

remember little white signs hanging from the ceiling in the store that said, OPA ceiling price. And you thought it had something to do with the ceiling? Do you remember when you had to put black coverings over all your windows before you could turn on an inside light at night? Do you remember seeing your father paint the top part of his headlights black? Do you remember hearing the shed door rattle when they dropped depth charges on German submarines? Do you remember seeing splintered pieces of gray boats washed up on the shore? Do you remember running inside when a plane went over because you had heard that planes dropped bombs? Do you remember not being able to hear your radio program because the president had died and they were playing organ music? Do you remember going to Boston in a Model A and nobody even looked or waved at you when you drove by? Do you remember the first time you saw a television screen and the green little dancing rolls of toilet paper? Do you remember the lamp on the shelf behind the kitchen stove? Grandfather had put in power fifteen years before, but the lamp was still there just because it had always been there and that was where it belonged. Do you remember the old original clear light bulbs in the cellar?

If you're as old as I am, you might remember some of these things. And speaking of making money, times have changed, so I hope your kid is studying plumbing, computer repair, or law. Because, even if you are twenty years younger than I am, even you can remember when a Maine teacher could buy a full-sized, completely furnished house on a respectable piece of land for less than one year's salary.

~

My wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, has brown eyes. She is not old enough to know the song, *Beautiful Beautiful Brown Eyes* which I sang to her the other day.

Chorus:

Beautiful, beautiful brown eyes, Beautiful, beautiful brown eyes,

Beautiful, beautiful brown eyes, I'll never love blue eyes again.

Willie, oh Willie, I love you, Love you with all my heart;

Tomorrow we might have been married, But liquor has kept us apart.

Seven long years I've been married, I wish I was single again;

A woman never knows of her troubles, Until she has married a man.

Down to the barroom he staggered, Staggered and fell at the door;

The last words that he ever uttered, "I'll never get drunk any more."

You might find it interesting to learn that I found the words to this song on an Arkansas Family Tradition Web Site.

~

I saw Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 movie about Birds the other night. Remember when Hitchcock had a TV program? There was a cartoon profile of him on the screen. He would say, "Good evening." And then he would make some witty observation. So even though I'm not into scary films, I watched Birds because I always thought that Hitchcock was great. The blonde heroine got in a skiff and rode across a small body of water, and the first thing you notice is that she is pounding through a two foot chop when they shot her from one angle and a flat arse calm when they shot her from another. So here is five seconds of bobbing up and down and five seconds of skimming along like an iceboat back to five seconds of bobbing up and down. It was like reading a sentence with past tense and present tense in the same sentence. And you wonder why a genius like Hitchcock would insult us like that until you see the heroine playing piano. You can see her hands romping up and down like Garner but what you hear on the sound track are tinkling arpeggios and you wonder why they bothered to show her hands at all. Even worse was when she went upstairs with a flashlight all by herself. Here they are barricaded in a house so you know that something bad is going to happen when she goes upstairs and opens that door. In real life no one would be that stupid. What? I don't know your son-in-law? Of course she goes in the room looking for trouble, and once she is in there and the birds attack her, she hasn't got brains enough to turn around and walk out again. If that movie were made nowadays, every blonde in the United States would sue Hitchcock for slander.

~

Although it is very nice to be able to grind your teeth and make growling noises in your throat every time you look at your spouse, as I am able to do, we understand that looks are not all that important when it comes to living with someone year after year in a successful, happy marriage. Even the young people who create the reality shows on TV realize that a high IQ and a nice personality are more important than looks when it comes to choosing your life's partner. If you only see the IQ and the kindness and the generosity and the industry, the plain container that it comes in can be beautiful. Love is blind. This was recently brought home to me as I clicked in and out of the last few minutes of a TV program called *The Bachelorette*. I assume that the bachelorette had gone through a whole raft of guys who weren't concerned with this superficial looks thing and must have been interested in her as a person, and when I clicked in she was putting the skids under number two. Number two looked like the kind of guy you probably won't see your granddaughter dragging home at spring break. I would guess that he had a Master's Degree in Business Administration from Harvard and that he worked for Chase Bank. Mother probably modeled face cream, grandfathers and great grandfa-

thers on both sides probably doctors who loaned money to Ford or Thomas Edison. He had probably broken at least one leg while skiing in Switzerland. I doubt very much that this guy had ever, in his life, asked a girl for a date. Just a look in her direction would have been enough and after a movie and pizza he would have had to beg her to let go of his arm so he could go home. This last part sounds like my old buddy Red Minzy. Anyway, he wasn't wiping the tears from his eyes as he turned and slowly walked down camera. But when Mr. Big Number One Winner Man came on and got the thumbs up, he hauled out a piece of metal that looked like the code a graph ring you used to get in a 1949 box of Wheaties and squeezed it on her finger. I truly hope that they will be happy and that he never finds himself in the position of the young man who married the very homely opera star. You will recall that on the third night of their honeymoon, he looked at her and said, "Please sing something."

~

If you have ever offered me a bowl of pea soup or a dish of potato salad, you know that I politely refused as I explained that pea soup and potato salad are thrills I'm saving for my 80s. When you are seventy and eighty and ninety there are things that you should be able to do for the first time with the same reaction an eleven year old experiences with his first cigarette. After all, when you have done everything, what is there left to live for? Listen closely, because I'm about to confess to something I did this morning that I have never, ever done before in my sixty-eight years on this planet. I did something that I was sure I never would do. I did something I never thought I could do. I have sneered at others when I have seen them do it because I knew I was above such foolishness. I have even written snotty newspaper columns about it just so I could flaunt my superiority before my friends and neighbors. But when I found myself in their situation, I was powerless. I had no control over my actions. Without thinking, like a mindless puppet yanked by a string, I reacted exactly as they did. I hope you'll tell me that it's just part of being human, and that I shouldn't let it bother me. Anyway, I might not be a better man than I was yesterday, but it shook me to the innermost core of my being and I'm certainly wiser. Are you ready? This morning my best friend, The Booger Boy, stopped in for a visit. He was no sooner through the door, when I took Marsha's one year old grandchild by the hand, and said to her, "Come over here and show The Boy what you can do."

~

You have heard people talk about Maine humor. And New York City humor. And Louisiana humor. And you might have heard me say that humor does not have geographical boundaries. I have taken a story out of a 1922 Swedish book, changed Skane and Haparanda to Fort Kent and Portsmouth, and waa laa, pure American humor. I have always maintained that the only boundary humor has is an intellectual one. Change

the accent or the language of the person telling the story, and most stories will pass for a story in that region. There are levels of humor, however. Like it or not, there are several classes of people in society and each class enjoys its own level of humor. Sam Collins once told me something that was so dry I didn't get it for six months. People like Sam Collins who are the wittiest people in Maine will never be appreciated because most of us are not smart enough to understand what they said. Only a handful of stories do not apply to this humble universal rule for humor. The funniest story I heard two years ago cannot be understood by people in Augusta or Ashland because they would not know that some lobster catchers steal from their neighbor's traps. Tell the same story in Port Clyde or on Beals and people would fall off their chairs. And I just heard a story that wouldn't work in Maine. A farmer comes down to his pond and sees two college girls swimming without a stitch on. In Maine they would come out of the water with a big tin pan in front of them and the punch line would be, "And you probably think there's a bottom in that pan." But in Florida the farmer says, "Don't mind me girls, I just came down to feed my alligators."

~

While eating my morning rolled oats I read on the TV screen—I can't hear television, but I can read the words on the bottom of the screen—I read a woman saying "I don't believe in zero tolerance because zero tolerance implies zero wisdom." And if that's not what she said, that's what I think she said. And, as you know, it is not what you say on the radio that matters, it is what people think you said on the radio that matters. "I don't believe in zero tolerance because zero tolerance implies zero wisdom." Do you agree that there can be extenuating circumstances for unintentionally or inadvertently disobeying written or unwritten laws and social customs? You have read the oldest books and plays extant so you can rattle off the names of good people who found themselves in hot water, not because they did something bad, but because something unthinkable happened to them that had never happened to anyone before. You immediately think of Billy Budd. So for over 2,000 years much of the world's notable literature has dealt with good people who went about minding their own business who, through no fault of their own, violated some zero tolerance rule, and suffered accordingly. If even a whit of common sense or wisdom had been applied to their particular situation, there would have been no story and therefore no book or play about it. Aristophanes and Melville would have been out of business. So anyone who can read learned early on what happens when zero tolerance takes the place of common sense. Unfortunately, there aren't many of them walking our streets today. The zero tolerance problem is exacerbated today because people who can't read have created our quantitative society. They have saddled us with things like Learning Results. You can measure Learning Results. People who can't think love learning results

because they can measure it. And then they can distort the study in any way to give them the results that they want.

~

What do you think about zero tolerance? I'm not sure about this, but there seems to be two basic schools of thought when it comes to prisons. One is that a prison should try to rehabilitate criminals so that they can be productive members of society when they are released. Get a job. Stay straight. Pay taxes. Some folks think that if prisons can turn people around, teach them a trade, give them a new life, prisons are worth the money. The other philosophy is that a prison only exists to keep bad guys off the street and to punish them for their crimes.

I'm sure we can find examples that will support each position. But the other night, while clicking to get away from a commercial in the middle of the *Jerry Springer* show, I saw a news story about a man who had killed three people. There was no reason to kill these three people. It was a senseless, needless stupid act by a very young boy on the run. Three families were devastated. While serving thirteen years in jail, the killer managed to earn two college degrees suma cum laud with 4 point grade average. When he got out, he earned two PhDs, got married, and got a job teaching in a college. Everybody loved him. He was a great teacher. He was a valuable contributing member of society, until the state of Texas came up with a new policy that said employers and neighbors deserved to be notified of an ex-con's whereabouts. Certainly a prudent thing to do if you are releasing a pedophile. But is it a nice thing to do to a killer who has been a valuable contributing member of society in the twenty or so years since his release? How do you feel about this? Would you rather have this man teaching at a college or would you rather see your tax dollars supporting a washout on welfare? I wonder what Solomon would have to say about zero tolerance. I'm not Solomon, but I'll bet that after that TV show that man had to hire an agent to handle his book and movie offers.

~

Talking about things that creep out of the woods at night to eat whatever they can find, reminds me of one of my favorite stories about my annual lobster picnic. For fourteen years or so I invited the world to my back yard to eat lobsters, their own picnic lunch and to enjoy a stage show by Gary Crocker and Jackson Gilman and Michael Michlon and Nick Appolonio and Brad Terry and dozens of similarly talented friends who are the top performers in Maine. My wife Marsha, the almost perfect woman, hated this little informal gathering of 1,000 or so of my closest friends, and by firmly employing various and sundry measures she finally got me to put an end to it.

But here's what used to happen. When my friends had gone home, and while Roan Buck was packing up his huge lobster cooker, I sorted the contents of several trash and garbage barrels. Papers and such in one pile, lobster shells in another to be dumped in the woods for the little forest animals. And right there on my back lawn I threw the bread scraps because I knew that they would be gone before the sun came up the next day.

What kind of beady-eyed animals creep into your back yard under cover of darkness to eat the scraps of food you might have dropped there? I had cats for sure, skunks and raccoons, an occasional dog and coyotes, who were always tolled in by the smell of hundreds of lobster bodies rotting on the edge of my forest. Can you think of anything these animals won't eat? I once read of an elderly woman who was eaten by her cats before neighbors found the body. Dogs often eat pencils, canning jar rubbers, and shoe tongues, as anyone with normal vision has verified countless times. Unless you walk daily on little paths in the woods, you might not be as conversant with the gastro-intestinal prowess of skunks and raccoons, but I assure you, they are formidable. And then we have the wily coyote who can make a meal on an ossified ox jawbone.

My point is that, given enough time, a collection of the aforementioned creatures would be able to eat your town's entire landfill, tinfoil, storage batteries and all.

Now I don't need to tell you that I'm a sixty-eight year old Maine man with a definite opinion on what is fit to eat and what is not fit to eat. So you can understand the great amount of enjoyment I got one morning when I stepped outside and saw that the only scrap left on my lawn was one of those hippie bean sprout holders they call Pita Bread.

~

A kid who graduated from college almost ten years ago says that she will not have her college loans paid off for another five years when she is thirty-five. You can understand that she is a teacher. Are there other professions that require a life of poverty for fifteen years while they pay off college loans? I'm the humble farmer at gmail dot com and I'd like to be able to at least wave a warning flag to young people contemplating a life of hardship, not that it will do any good.

My sixth cousin once removed, John Robinson, does very well working for an oil company. I think he is a logistics manager. Cousin John writes: "I never could understand why some people go to college and take a course of study that doesn't prepare them for a real job."

I reply: "Do remember that when I started college in 1958, a teacher could expect to earn three times as much as a person in the military and that one year's teacher's salary would buy one a furnished house on an acre or so of land. Back then, a teacher's salary moved one into the upper

middle class. Back then tuition at a state teachers college was $50 or so a semester. It took me five Saturday nights playing bass in a dance band at the Blue Goose in Belfast to earn that $50. In my nine years of college I never lived in a dormitory. I would have forgotten this if several people had not enjoyed reminding me of it over the years, but I was known to bring home American chop suey that was destined for the school kitchen garbage can and heat it up in the driveway in a gallon can over a fire of dry twigs because we were not allowed to have hot plates in our rooms. Back then, $5, or half my week's bass playing salary, paid for my room and the other half went for food."

Cousin John continues: "I'm not talking about the people who are enough of a self starter to be writers or artists, but people who take Liberal Arts courses only to find nobody in the business world cares. But I guess these types prefer to be perpetual students."

I reply: "I actually did enjoy going to college, and would still be going if I could. But trying to educate me was like pouring water into a bucket filled with holes. Now to reiterate my point and ask you a question. Forty-five years ago you could work your way through teachers college, emerge debt free, and in one year earn enough to buy a furnished house and barn on an acre of land. Does the same situation exist today in other fields? Today there are college graduates who are about to enter rich kid professions that will enable them to buy a furnished house on an acre of land with one year's salary. But, thirty years from now will they discover that times have changed so much that their rich kid profession isn't paying squat and that even their retirement plans have been snatched away? I'm glad that I will never know."

~

The people in ancient Rome were pretty tough. They could go to the Coliseum and watch people kill and mutilate each other non stop for an hour. The people who produce the evening news shows know that modern man couldn't stand that kind of constant pressure, which is why we have commercials telling us how we can help our dogs lose weight.

~

After being invited to a sixth grade stage presentation of Romeo & Juliet, I replied: "Len, I would be careful if I were you. Is there any place for subversives in our present quantitative bottom-line someone-must-be-held-accountable school system? Would you want your child to waste his valuable time in school learning the need to respect others or how to be a good neighbor when it can't even be measured on a test? Is your school going to qualify for federal and state funding if they teach children how to cook or build bookcases? How do you measure courtesy, love, respect or a pleasant smile? Ask yourself if your students will be able to survive in Yale if you teach them that it's not nice to lie and cheat. If Maine teachers

want to do the job that is presently expected of them, they had better be teaching kids how to become mindless obedient workers who all got good grades."

~

I'm reading a scholarly treatise on laughter. This morning I read that people seldom laugh when they are alone. I laugh all the time when I'm alone. How can anyone think, without laughing out loud? Hear this. Before I'd read ten pages the author insulted me twice. He used two very common words: onomatopoeia and glossolalia, and after each of these words he defined them for me in brackets. He is assuming that you and I don't know what onomatopoeia and glossolalia mean.

~

A young Portland friend, whose produced-in-Maine television program is presently available to 35 million viewers, writes to me that "We are losing the best and the brightest kids because they don't have the opportunities that we at People, Places & Plants are building ourselves."

Both his fear and the answer to this ubiquitous but hollow mantra are incorporated his sentence. Maine's best and brightest kids *are* able to build their own opportunities. He is one of them. Your kid is another.

If you consider money to be an index of success, I know a man who lives on the same land in the town of St. George where he was born and brought up who earned a million dollars last year. It ain't where you go—it's what you know. Being a Type A individual who can work an eighteen hour day without even feeling tired helps, too.

The folks who wring their hands and cry that there are only a few good jobs in Maine are very often the people who moved here and took them.

~

Too many Maine boys and girls have an inferiority complex. They were brought up to believe that they can't do anything and that living and working in Maine proves it. They are also taught that there is nothing in Maine to attract a child with ability. Neighbors automatically assume that anyone who writes home from an apartment in Newark must be successful. When I'm doing a stage show, I'll sometimes tell the audience that I live seven houses from where I was born and brought up. Then I'll ask how many of them still live in the same town where they were born. If any hands appear, I sigh and say, "Two or three of us here without no ambition."

"Our best and brightest are moving away" is an empty, undefined phrase. One hears it so often one suspects it is perpetuated to serve some nefarious economic or political end.

Ask yourself if the best and brightest really do move away. I am descended from the Williamsons and Farquhars from Scotland, the Fogartys and Robinsons from Ireland, the Hilts from Germany, the Carpenters from England, the Gilchrests from who knows where and the Svenssons from Sweden. Were they the best and brightest or were they simply too numb to earn a living in their own home town? Is "My daughter has a great job in New York City" a nice way of telling your neighbors that she isn't clever enough to earn a living in Maine?

Every day I give thanks that over the past 270 years most of my relatives moved out of St. George. If none of my great-great-great-great-great grandfather's descendants had moved since 1734, the Thomaston area would make Hong Kong look like a howling Siberian wilderness.

Why do people move? In 1816 Maine people had a good reason to leave a place that offered twelve-month winters. In 1845 my great-grandmother went down to the Lowell mill to earn some pocket change, but she soon returned home. She hadn't intended to stay. Because of restricted shipping during the Civil war, many Maine coast seafaring people had to look for what they hoped would be greener pastures. "Stay on The Farm Boys" is a good old grange song. Over 100 years ago Maine farmers worried about their children who looked longingly at the promise of a better life down at the Pittsburgh steel mills.

Now, many of Maine's best of the brightest have chosen to earn a living through the Internet. They are working out of their homes in Cutler, South Hiram, and Ashland. Professor Allen Pease tells me that his computer problems are solved by a man in India. Unfortunately, if you listen to the social scientists of my generation, people who never leave their homes and who do nothing but look at computer screens all day are not working. It will be another twenty years before a Maine mother will be able to look a neighbor in the eye and proudly say, "Nope, I ain't seen him much neither, but he's still down there—must be thirty-four years old now. Runs his cables right out of our cellar."

If you want to define success as income earned by the best and the brightest, you should probably first quietly ease Maine people into two categories: those who are content and getting by with what they have, and those like my millionaire friend who will never have enough.

On perhaps the most important level, did yesterday's best and bright est become your friendly next-door neighbors who like your kids and tol erate your dog? Or did the best and brightest evolve into smooth, me-first service providers who always have an excuse for not doing the job you thought you paid them to do?

Your job isn't your life but the best of the extremely bright enjoy their work. My brother Jim, who was visiting friends on a Maine island, observed a man cutting alders next to the small airport runway. Jim asked about the man and was told that while in high school he had

worked as a caretaker for a wealthy summer resident. Discovering that the young man was brilliant, his employer sent him away to Harvard where he easily earned a degree, and came back home where he still happily digs clams and cuts alders.

On the other hand, remember that tens of thousands of years ago, when the best and brightest migrated down through our continent, some of them ended up in a swamp in Florida.

~

Just about the most unsettling thing I've seen lately on TV was not written by Stephen King. It was a Dateline show on a cult. How does anyone get sucked up by a cult? We all have friends who know that they are God's chosen people and that the rest of us are going to burn in hell. I have a friend who tells me that he rolls on the floor and talks in tongues. Some cultists home school their children only to keep them from having friends and finding out that they are different. It's a control thing. The women have spacey eyes, often breed like rabbits and are dominated by their husbands. I read on the web that a cult is "an ideological organization held together by charismatic relationships and demanding total commitment." According to Zablocki, cults are at high risk of becoming abusive to members, in part because members' adulation of charismatic leaders contributes to their becoming corrupted by the power they seek and are accorded.

As I recall, this cult started off as a Bible study group. The TV narrator blamed twisted religious beliefs, whatever that might mean, for the death of a child. I immediately looked for more information on cults on the web, and from what I read there are support groups for family members and even half way houses to help recovering cultists back into society.

Cults are scary, because we don't see them on TV until from one to several hundred people suddenly end up dead. This show was about a young couple who had starved their baby to death because God was going to provide. Unless one is an infant, the premise is a valid one, because God will provide for an adult cultist. Elderly parents, who worry about their hungry and deprived grandchildren, will often provide the cultists with shelter, food and money—for a few years. But sooner or later the old folks realize that their money is only enabling their kid and spouse to continue in their cultist behavior, and finally shut off the money with the hope that somebody will have to get a job. At that point, well-meaning neighbors, who feel bad for the kids, kick in with groceries. So God provides. A well fed cultist who hasn't worked in ten years has empirical data to support his thesis that God will provide. Perhaps cultists know something that we don't.

~

You cannot live someone else's life for them. You cannot make plans for others. No matter how carefully you might try to instill your values into your children, there comes a day when you have no control over who they bring home for dinner. Your child might attend a Baptist Sunday school for twelve years and then run off at the age of twenty-three to join a cult. How do you tell your mother, who had her nose cut off because of melanoma, that your son has opened a tanning parlor? You receive an award for your outstanding thirty-five years as a high school counselor the same year your kid is sentenced to rehab. You try, you cry, you ask yourself why. But at last there comes a bright sunny morning when you and your spouse jump out of bed and give each other a knowing smile that says, "Good luck kids. We're going to spend it."

~

An old man walks into a jeweler's shop late one Friday with a young girl who could have been his granddaughter and says, "I'm looking for a ring for my girlfriend."

The jeweler brings out a $10,000 ring and the man says that he'll take it. He writes out a check and says he'll be back to get the ring on Monday when the check clears.

Monday morning the jeweler calls the man and says, "There's no money in that account."

"I know, but it made for a wonderful weekend."

That story reminds me that I've got to get busy with ghost writing a book for my best friend, who, in his younger traveling salesman days was an innovative master when it came to devising similar schemes and techniques for picking up women in airports or car rental counters. You know how they say that anyone can bake a cake if they follow the recipe? This book would simply be a list of simple, but unique and clever recipes. Which also reminds me that he and I recently went over to the Owls Head Transportation museum in my Model T. I've been driving that Model for fifty-three years and the Boy, who is only sixty-two, has had an occasional ride in it for at least forty-five years. And in the course of our deliberations, it was determined that on this particular trip we were not going to try to pick up any young chicks. The Boy asked me if I had forgotten how. I said, "No, I've forgotten why."

~

Many people who appear in films on stage or on TV, really enjoy hearing from their public. Sincere complements are very nice. One of the most memorable letters I ever got which I appreciate more than the writer can know, says, "Dear humble, You have no idea of how much we enjoyed watching that TV show you and the monkey made at Planet in Camden a

week or two ago. It was a fantastic, funny show. After watching it three or four times we realized—that it would have been just as good if you had stayed home and let the monkey do it."

~

You probably know that the Survivalists are people who did a Robinson Caruso thing on some island for TV. From what I read, a lot of people watch it. As I recall, the animal rights crowd protested because some of the survivalists ate rats.

But, hey, you do what you've got to do to survive. I once gave a Russian physicist a ride to Thomaston in my Model T. She told me that she survived Leningrad. I didn't ask her if she ate rats, but from what I have heard, hungry people in Leningrad were known to eat worse things than that.

Far as I'm concerned, people can go over in the corner, and as long as they don't bother me, they can eat anything they want. And, on the other side of the coin, as far as I'm concerned—this is a free country—you can protest all you want about people eating rats. But—you come down to the Rockland Lobster Festival on the coast of Maine this summer and protest about people eating lobsters—and a lot of us are going to get ugly.

~

My friend the Booger Boy just bought another one of those assisted living or nursing home places. This one is in Springvale. And because the Boy wants nothing but the best for his elderly friends, and seeing as the Maine taxpayers are footing the bill anyway, he brought a brand new twelve or so passenger van to take them shopping or on trips or wherever it is old people in homes like to go, and another nice car for management. And being an excellent business man, instead of hiring a couple of kids to drive two new vehicles to Springvale he asked me and Bruce the Goose to help him do it. So we drove two new cars to Springvale. We were getting ready to drive the old cars back home when the maintenance man at that home said, "Oh, look. That snake crawling across the hood reminds me, I took two more snakes off that car seat this morning."

Over the past sixty-eight years I have seen several million cars on several continents, but only in Springvale, Maine have I ever seen a snake crawl across the hood of a car and down into the air vent by the windshield. If you are a herpetologist please tell us how a snake can get into an automobile and why a snake would want to take up residence there. And, remember, the next time you're looking at a second hand car in Maine, before you get in for a test drive don't be afraid to ask the salesman, "Is this the one with the snake?"

~

Man came up to me last week and said he didn't have any use for those evangelist ministers. Of course I had to snub him up short right there. I says, "Think about it for a minute. If them evangelist ministers had their way, there wouldn't be anyone in prison. If them evangelist ministers had their way, we wouldn't need locks on the henhouse door. About the only thing you'd have to watch out for, would be your wife."

~

Summer is just about over, and thousands of summer people who have been spending a vast amount of money here for the past three months have either gone, or are thinking about it.

Would you suspect that big city people from away don't think like we do here on the coast of Maine? You might not like to say it, but you've got to admit that it's true. This is, of course, the reason some people claim you can't give an IQ test to an Eskimo and get valid results—they claim the score would be slanted by the environment. If you've got time, I'll give you an example of how your outlook on things can be determined by where you live.

Years ago, when they were first thinking about putting houses out on Rackliff's Island, the state and the town held a lot of environmental meetings—just to make sure things were done right. The developer's plans looked pretty good, until a very smart man from away noticed that there was no allowance made for sewage disposal when the power went out.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, "when there's no power to run the sewage pumps? It will be an ecological disaster. Within tweny-four hours, thousands of gallons of sewage will be running over the rocks into the ocean."

Whereupon, one of the natives observed, "When the power's out, where they going to get the water to flush?"

~

Parents, attention. There are things out there on the Internet that your kids shouldn't see, and if you kids will go in the other room, I'm going to tell your parents about a horrible thing that showed up in my email last week. It is a message titled: *Attract Females Easily*. It said that thousands of years ago men used to attract females simply by the smell of their bodies. I thought that was interesting because I was up at the Common Ground and noticed one or two guys who were still doing it. Anyway, that was all I read because this Attract Females email letter was obviously directed at younger men. At my age I'd rather see an article that would explain *What To Do With Them* once they have been attracted.

~

I took a risky chance down at the last lobster festival, and hugged a sweet little eighty year old woman. Of course I didn't realize that it was risky at the time, but now I know that I was leaving myself wide open for a charge of sexual harassment.

There's big money in that now. There are experts who will come into your school or your Rotary Club meeting and tell you what sexual harassment is—because, you know, where it's rather new, the boundaries are still somewhat fuzzy and ill defined. You might be sexually harassing someone and not even know it unless an expert came in and told you what you'd done that was wrong.

Right now that little six year old first grade kid down in North Carolina is getting a lot of coverage for giving in to the little girl who asked him to kiss her. Wouldn't you think that even at six years old he would know that kissing is an unnatural act which is not condoned? Where do you suppose he ever learned a nasty thing like that? It's quite unlikely that he sees his father kiss his mother on the cheek, because if we may believe what we see on the daily talk shows, it would be much more likely if his parents were fighting all the time, or divorced and separated.

Anyway, I'll bet that six year old kid learned his lesson and he'll think twice before he lets some morally depraved little girl sweet talk him into kissing her again.

You must admit that we live in interesting times. Had he smashed the little girl in the face with his fist, his name would be unknown in America today. And, had he kissed a boy, nobody would have thought it strange.

~

If you visit enough stores in Camden, you'll find a book named, *Why Gay Guys are a Girl's Best Friend*.

How could you argue with that? Anybody who thinks about it at all knows that gay guys are everybody's best friend. Ever see one run up your taxes by sending eight kids to your school's remedial reading program? Ever have one break your heart by marrying your high school sweetheart or running off with your wife?

Seeing that book brought to mind a poem I wrote years ago that summarizes the situation: "Oh what a great world this would be, if all the guys were gay—but me."

~

When I was a little boy I spent a lot of time walking in the woods and the fields. And in the natural course of events, several times every summer, I'd accidentally step on a hornet's nest and I'd get stung. And I'd run and I'd roll and I'd swat until I got clear of the hornets. If you know little

boys, you can believe that I'd creep back to that hornet's nest when they'd calmed down a bit—and hornets do calm down quickly if you leave them alone—I'd creep back so I could get close, and I'd poke a stick in their little hole in the ground where they were coming out. And because I was a little boy I'd also chunk a couple of rocks about the size of croquet balls at their hole. And even though I thought I was bigger and smarter than a hornet, I'd still get stung a dozen more times for my trouble. And even if I had the satisfaction of wiping out the whole nest, the following week I'd usually step on another nest, because you ain't going to get rid of hornets. They're out there everywhere in little holes in the ground, and unless you stay away from their holes, they're going to be all over you.

A few of us were dangerous when we were little boys because we didn't understand cause and effect. We were very likely to do stupid things, like poking a stick in a hornet's nest. Our parents and our neighbors thought we'd never grow up.

Some people think a boy isn't grown up until he can drink a few beers while driving a car. But I don't think a boy becomes a man until he can get stung by a hornet and keep on walking.

~

This morning my house guest Bera from Boston said that when she was a kid, they all went swimming together. We did, too. I told her that fifteen or so of us, all the kids in the neighborhood, would walk down to Tootie's shore and go swimming. Every day we'd go an hour later, because when the tide was coming in over the clam flats on sunny days the water would be warmer. I wasn't a very clever boy fifty-five years ago, because it wasn't until we were talking about swimming this morning that I suddenly realized that when some girl's towel would slip and fall off, it wasn't an accident.

~

You saw it on one of those morning TV shows. An expert on the way college kids live was talking about "Hooking up" and "Catching feelings." From what I remember, hooking up means a one night stand. Catching feelings means let's do it again tomorrow night. Chomsky would say that they might be employing different lexical items, but the deep structure remains the same. Don't laugh at young people when they change the language. Every generation does it. When I look at the picture of my great grandparents, I'm amazed that they had any children at all.

~

Perhaps you will help me understand the macho man. The past two macho men I've seen in television movies come across to me as incredibly stupid helpless creatures. Is macho synonymous with stupid and insecure? Both plots involved a man who failed in business and then lied to

his wife or girlfriend about it. The lie, the attempt to deceive, appears to cause more trouble than the act of getting fired or having a book refused by your editor. Do you see a redeeming value in these films? Are the people making them finally trying to teach us something?

~

How many of your friends are Type A's? As you know, the Type A individual has to run everything. They are the original lemme show ya boys. Two of them cannot exist in an organization or a marriage without destroying it. Type A's cannot rest until they and only they have the power. Being married to or working for a Type A is like living on the edge of a tornado: you cringe well back from the swirling clouds of dust. They and only they know where pictures should be hung on the walls. They have to arrange the furniture in the house. Ever see man and wife out in the driveway standing toe to toe screaming at each other? Type A's. Their marriage doesn't stand a chance. On the other hand, you're lucky if you work for a Type A because he or she is unable to delegate authority. Nobody can do it as well as he can, he trusts no one to do it right, so he is not only the conductor of the band—you will also see him playing piano, blowing the trombone, beating the drums, applauding from the audience and then writing a review of the performance. All the other performers have to do is stand in line as he signs their checks—the secretary can't be trusted to do it right. The Type A manager knows how many rolls of toilet paper his organization uses in a year, month or day. His computer prints out charts and graphs which he hangs on the wall and collects in thick, well thumbed books.

When I was in Orlando last week, I met Charles Ware, who is a healthcare engineer at a hospital in Perry, Florida. I mentioned to Charles that my wife was a Type A and he said that his was, too. I asked him if he knew what my wife did after I made the bed. I almost cried when he said, "She tears it apart and makes it right." I'd found a soul mate, you see. Charles said that he couldn't understand why so many men have to be macho. He's been married for over thirty years and he says that he tells his young friends that it is much easier to swim with the current—go with the flow. Then he told me that old story about the preacher who had a dozen hens of all colors. He said that he would give one to any man who would stand up and admit that he was the boss in the house. When one man jumped up, the preacher said that he could have any hen he wanted. And there was silence. So he asked again, "Which one do you want?" And the man said, "She says she wants the brown one."

~

Are you one of those old people who keep putting off learning how to run your computer? Don't put it off. You won't be frustrated like many of us

who fought it out on our own because you have many friends who will guide your key strokes. It's simple and easy when someone shows you. Do remember that we all have a level of expertise that keeps us comfortable with our computers, and we are all different. The motto of the college up at Potsdam where I flunked out was, "Let Each Become all He is Capable of Being," and I think that can be applied to computers. Learn as much as you need—so you can do what you need to do. There are, however, people like Richard Bird who doesn't want to stop there. Richard Bird enjoys computers for another reason, and he explained it to me. Richard said, "It gives me something in my life over which I have complete and total control."

~

I recently spoke to some people who own retail stores down in Massachusetts. Of course I went on the Internet to learn what I could about retailing. According to what I read, a very big problem store owners have, is keeping their employees from stealing. Which would seem to confirm that it's been a long time since most Americans learned anything important at Sunday School. But I read about many ways to keep employees from stealing, and was somewhat shocked to realize that, as a result of my studies, I had also learned many ways to steal. By the time I finished, I realized that, should anyone in retailing want to make a good living, they should sell their stores and come up with a test that will detect dishonesty in poor-risk job applicants.

~

For over eight years I produced six or so television commercials every week for businesses in the Rockland and Camden area. The hardest part of selling my service back then was convincing store owners that humor sells. Of course everyone knows that now. The best commercials one sees on national TV now are very funny, but I was ahead of my time so selling these funny TV spots was an uphill battle. You know that I never boast or brag about myself, but you should know that I am proud of one presentation I made. And I think I'm justified in saying to myself, or to you, a close friend for many years—"Robert, you are fantastic. You really outdid yourself on that one." I'm talking here about my visit with Ann at Tuttle's Shoe Barn. I want you to know that that was powerful advertising. Because—as soon as my show went on the air, someone who couldn't even wait for them to open, broke in and stole two pair of shoes.

~

Down in Florida people don't have the right jobs. I called for an Alamo rent a car. The woman talked like a machine gun and I couldn't understand her because I didn't have my hearing aid on the telephone. She was wound right up like she was selling on commission. On the other hand, I

went into a fast Burger place and I ordered a burger. Burgers will keep me alive until I can get on a plane to Portland. I never order anything special because I don't want to wait, so I have even learned to eat burgers with raw onions and ketchup. I could see the burger sitting right there waiting for someone to put it on my tray. You don't know what slow is until you've gone into a Burger place on the east coast of Florida and ordered a burger. You've seen them bring a suspect out of the courthouse on video, and then they slow the video down so it looks like the fellow is barely moving so you can get a good look at his face and the handcuffs. That's like a snowmobile race in Fort Kent compared to the way the people move behind the burger counters in Florida. There were five or six people behind the counter all looking at each other or nothing in particular and it was at least five minutes by my watch before one of them got around to reach over, pick up the burger, and put it in front of me. Why can't they get these burger people to answer the phones at Alamo and get the Alamo people to serve the burgers?

~

Did you see it on TV? Fish are now exhibiting male and female tissue because of some estrogen chemicals that get pumped into the water. The scientist who is studying the situation said that this is the first time he has ever been scared. These sex changing chemicals have been outlawed in some other countries, but they are still being pumped out of sewage plants into the rivers here. Any Senator who voted to outlaw these sex-altering chemicals would be blacklisted by every chamber of commerce in America for being anti-business, so they'll probably be around for a while. Think about this. If fish can be genetically altered to be both male and female, why couldn't humans? We are talking about something pretty scary here when you stop to think that it would effectively make marriage illegal in at least 11 states.

~

Here's the adult part of the show. I don't have to worry about offending young ears because you have to be forty-five or fifty years old to understand what I'm going to say here, anyway. My friend John said that when his kids were in high school, he told them that they were responsible for three things. One: They were going to have to pay for their own car. Two: They were going to have to get a job to pay for their car. And Three: They were going to be responsible for their own bills.

I think that that is the most terrible advice I ever heard. If you really care for your kid, you should say: Don't get a car. If you don't get a car, you won't need to get a job and you'll never have any bills.

~

If you want to see people turn out at a public meeting, tell them that their kids got just about the lowest scores of any school in the state. At the meeting they will be told that a combination of problems led to the low scores and that the problem can be solved by introducing internal standardized testing to make sure that students are learning what they should be learning at every grade.

But let's look at this standardized testing foolishness carefully. Each student has different interests and abilities. People learn at different rates. There is nothing wrong with this. It is part of being human. When you are raising children and not chickens, variety is a wonderful and necessary thing. Think what happens when you test every student in every school with the same test. One school, like North Haven, is going to be the top school in the state, and one school, hopefully not yours, is going to be the lowest school in the state.

And what is the effect of all this testing and standardizing? Teachers teach for the test. The creative thinking that is central to a real education is stifled. Of secondary importance testing is going to make the parents, who live in the towns where the lowest scoring students live, very ugly. It is not going to make them encourage their children to hit the books for two hours every evening instead of playing ball, watching TV or playing video games. Can this obsession with testing serve a purpose? Yes. It can give the paper shuffling administrators an excuse to cry out that they can eliminate the problem by hiring more administrators and doing even more testing—which, along with poor or no study habits, is what caused the problem in the first place. The people in the construction business like this kind of crisis. They'll do anything they can to further the impression that there is a crisis in education, because then they can claim that this problem that they've manufactured would go away if the kids had a new school building. Keep your eye on this standardization of curriculum in the state, this communistic effort to make every high school graduate a cookie-cutter copy of every other high school graduate. The ideal school of today would seem to prepare students to carry out mindless low-paying tasks without asking questions. Ask yourself what might motivate any group of people to stifle the individuality and creativity in your kid and their teachers. Yes, whenever you hear these doom-croakers, crying out that there's a crisis in education, sit back, relax, and ask yourself,—who stands to make money from all this?

~

By invitation only, it says on the top of the paper. For three days only the enclosed check is good for $1,880 towards a new car. Down below that it says, "Imagine... driving a new car for the same payment... or less than you're paying now." It would take someone with a good grasp on quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle to come up with a lower car

payment than I am making now. Why would anyone who is not making a truck payment want to start making a truck payment? And, think about this. One of the smartest men I know goes to Florida when he wants a truck or a car and he buys a good one for $800 to $900. No rust, low miles. You do have to look, but they are there, out beside the road, with For Sale signs on them. Fly down. Drive it home. Of course from time to time when you're around your friends you'll have to assume a haggard and stressed out look just to suggest that the payments are dragging you down. I do have to admit that these car salesmen know how to write great copy. Even though you might not need a car or want a car, they know how to make the average American's mouth water. They have spared no expense with their psychological marketing studies. They know what American's want. Even the most reluctant and conservative old Maine man can be drawn into the showroom by their sugared words. I'll be there. Right on the bottom of this circular it says, "Just for attending this special event, you will receive an original TV Beanie Baby."

~

A Harvard psychologist says that every society tends to impute its values upon another. You see an example of this every evening on the news. Another example: We now take it for granted that women have always wanted to become lawyers. We now take it for granted that women have never been happy raising children in the home.

But 100 years from now, when the pendulum has swung the other way, when women have fought and won their right to abandon the workplace and stay at home to raise their children, some will claim that women have always wanted it that way, that it was men who forced them to abandon their families and enter the workplace.

Women are smart, and I once mentioned to Truman Hilt that all of my wives were smarter than I am. And Truman said, "Where would you find a woman who wasn't?"

~

Has Christmas changed since you were a kid? When I was little my father used to haul burlap bags filled with brush down into the cellar and make wreaths. Then some man from Southern Fruit, I think it was, used to stop in and buy them for—was it $3 a dozen? Good money, whatever it was. Sometimes papa would load up his pickup truck with bundles of wreaths and take them down to Boston himself. Remember that this was back before they improved the roads down there so it was still possible to drive a truck into Boston.—It's been a long time since I've gone out in the woods and noticed that someone has snipped the tips off all my fir trees and I can't help but wonder if anyone in Maine makes wreaths today. Wreath makers are probably hampered by the authorities who keep arresting their illegal aliens. Nowadays many trees and decorations are

made of plastic. And of course electronic toys have taken the place of home made decorations. You've seen the plastic talking tree with the plastic mouth that flops up and down when you walk near it. It has a metallic voice that says, "Ho ho ho, Merry Christmas." Can't you see these electronic Christmas toys being improved? It is inevitable. How long do you think it will be before the little plastic Barbie doll stares up at its new owner and whines, "Please take me back to Walmart and buy me a new dress."

~

Over forty years ago when we were struggling to pay the $50 or so in tuition it cost us every semester down at Gorham Normal School, I can remember someone looking at himself in the mirror and saying, "Every day in every way I'm getting better and better." It probably had to do with the value of propaganda when employed in a module of self improvement. Something the student had learned in a class with Jim Whitten or Paul Barker. They always gave you something interesting to think about. Jim Whitten and Paul Barker taught us such good and valuable things it's a wonder they didn't get fired. Back then was when we learned that if you wanted to bamboozle the public, get some simple slogan out there and say it over and over and over until a majority of the people honestly believe it. Walmart quickly comes to mind, because I used to buy honey there at around $4 a quart, but after a year or two of Walmart slashing back their prices, slashing back their prices, it was costing me more like $9 a quart. Eliminate the competition and you can then charge anything you want. For quite some time now you've probably been more than somewhat amused by the envelopes you get from Central Maine Power. Each envelope has something printed on it about lower prices. I presently have one in hand that says, "CMP's price cuts mean lower rates for you!" I don't know about you, but I don't know if I could stand too many more of CMP's price cuts. But I've been digressing ever since I started this rant, because my beef here tonight is with the editor of my newspaper. On the front page of my newspaper it says that residential customers can expert to see a fifteen to twenty percent hike in their electric bills. Yes, I read it in the newspaper. Expect to see a fifteen to twenty percent hike in electric bills. My question to you is, how can newspapers print a lie like that and still think people are going to believe them?

~

Parents. Here's another one of those terrible things that children can be exposed to on the Internet. If your children are wandering around out there in Internet land, please be advised that this is the type of thing that they can and will be exposed to. I recently read—on the Internet—that ISABELLE, daughter of Charles VI of France, was only seven when she married England's twenty-nine-year-old King Richard II in 1396. Three

years later, she was a widow. You know, this is unfortunate, but what else can you expect when you marry a man old enough to be your father?

~

So far, this has been a month of birthdays and funerals. My brother Jim turned 60 and Joanna Johnson, who sewed these great pockets on my pants, celebrated her eightieth birthday. We mourned the passing of our witty friend Gerald Grant, and our cousin by marriage, Sylvia Kulju Robinson. After Sylvia's service, I invited her son, Cousin John Robinson, down to my house to give him a copy of our Robinson family genealogy.

When he drove in, I mentioned to Cousin John that I was somewhat ashamed to have him park his car in my dooryard. You see, it had Massachusetts license plates on it, and I was afraid someone driving by might see it.

I'm sorry mentioned it, because he offered to hide the plate with a Confederate flag.

~

Do you realize how lucky we are to live in Knox County? We have some of the nicest neighbors you'd find anywhere. Of course, a sociologist or an anthropologist would tell us that we like our neighbors because they share our values. We like the same things. We do the same things. We are all pretty much alike.

This was brought to my attention last week when I stopped in to visit my neighbor, Gary Hyvarinen. Gary was in a T-shirt, having a wonderful time up to his elbows in soapsuds in his immaculate kitchen. Gary said, "I do all the dishes and clean up. Sandra cooks." Then he said, "At Robert Faustini's house, he cooks and Beverly cleans up."

You know, even though my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, is from away, she has already assimilated the values of both Sandra Hyvarinin and Beverly Falla. Marsha cooks, and then she cleans up.

~

You probably know that I'm not a party animal. Never have been. I don't know what to do at private little social gatherings. Of course if I'm on stage before 300 people or if I'm playing in Stan Catell's studio orchestra, I know my place and conduct myself accordingly. But I'm very ill at ease and out of place at small house parties of twenty or thirty people.

Some friends in Fort Myers invited me to a Christmas party. I didn't want to go, but my buddy told me I should go because I'd see real Florida rednecks. I said, "What do you mean, rednecks?" And he explained that he meant hillbilly people from out in the swamp. According to my friend, rednecks have no idea of how to conduct themselves in today's society, and, because they are still living in the 1940s I might see one do some-

thing—well, not something to be malicious, but something that would reveal an incredible insensitivity.

So I went. And sure enough, right there after a delicious supper in a beautiful dining room crowded with women and children, two rednecks pushed back their chairs and—lit up cigarettes.

~

Now is the winter of our discontent. Meseemeth strange that the curing of hemorrhoids be served up with the evening meal. What think'st thou when as we eateth before the TV their sugared words proclaim anon, 'Out vile itch.' Weigh it but with the grossness of this age that prime time, it being mealtime, serveth up the plugging or sweetening of yet another body orifice. This we prescribe, though not physician. Deep malice makes too deep incision. Forget, forgive, conclude and be agreed. Our doctors say this is no month to bleed. For what's in a brand name but spotless reputation.

And all too soon the evening moon waxeth wane in her circled orb. Then, on Channel 12, we see things sweet to taste prove in digestion sour. With fear and trembling life's player on the screen makes assurance doubly sure, for past Rollaids, what comfort, man? His tongue, a stringless instrument, runs roundly in his head and crieth, 'Also past Tums.' Alas, not having forgone too much of a good thing, his face still combating with tears and smiles, as good luck would have it he finds an Alker-seltzer.

Yet later there on Channel 10

We see the worst of evil men

His profits grow as tempers boil

When JR cheats to sell more oil.

[Enter Jr]

I am determined to prove a villain and hate the idle pleasures of these days. Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous, by drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams to fright the souls of fearful adversaries. I'll play fast and loose, every third word a lie, as I am subtle, false, and treacherous. Ewen Oil will be mine. But soft, who's this? Come hither, my dear.

JR, JR I am well acquainted with your manner of wrenching the true cause the false way. You have, it appears to me, practiced upon the easy yielding spirit of this woman, and made her serve your uses both in purse and person.

Come, no more words of it, sweetest morsel of the night. I had no such intent, and there's an end on 't.

You forgot one—Birds of a feather—foul their own nests, and there's an end.

~

Two friends of mine named Joe and Adrian, stopped in for supper the other night. They are editors of an Internet magazine called Maine Views. Joe was telling about some nine-year-old violin prodigy. Only nine years old but Joe says that this kid can play difficult violin concertos with the best of them. Of course, to get that good in such a short time, you can imagine that the kid's nine years have been rather focused. It's my understanding that next year his mother plans to teach him how to walk and feed himself.

For the past week my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, has been at a family reunion in Delaware. Because I didn't know that she had frozen ten day's worth of dinners and suppers in the deep freeze, I went to town to forage for food.

I discovered an interesting new thing. Written on the shelves beneath the wheat flakes, is how much you are paying per pound. You don't believe that stores are doing this just to help you save money. Government probably made them do it. Anyway, the customer can now compare prices and hopefully make intelligent choices.

But—have stores found a way out around this? Can they abide by government regulations and still confuse the customer? Yes. I saw two bottles side by side. One was $16.48 per gallon. The other one was $2.08 per pound.

~

I've gone through a couple of check out lines lately, and it occurs to me that a person working at the checkout counter gets to know a lot about people. Just from evaluating the contents of a shopping cart, they know who buys granola to eat by daylight in front of family and friends, but who, when alone, pulls the shades to pig out on chocolate cake.

~

You are lucky if you could afford to have children. I envy you if because, unfortunately for me, I could never afford them. The money simply wasn't there. And I wasn't going to work for it.

But from listening to friends and reading the papers, I know a little bit about what I've missed. Tears come to my eyes when I realize that I've never been at the door to greet a child after school to catch every cold and flu bug known to man. I have missed their little friends, tipping over lamps and ruining carpets as they run playfully through the house. I have never rushed one to the hospital because he chopped off his shin bone with an axe. I've never bailed out another one charged with drunken driving and avoiding arrest. I have never had the thrill of meeting other proud parents at sporting events. Never have I experienced the excitement of pounding a fellow parent's head into the turf at a baseball game.

~

Have you been mowing your lawn this summer? Usually mine burns dry by this time, but this year it's growing in August like it grows in April.

It's hard to believe, but according to the news, a good part of the United States is engulfed by smoke and flames. You've heard that things are so hot and dry out west that trees are burning everywhere.

Do you remember hearing that this kind of thing has been going on for thousands of years? Ten thousand years ago when lighting set the woods on fire, it burned for weeks or months until it came to a river—or a rainstorm put it out. That's the way Mother Nature operates. Left to herself Mother Nature will do things in her own way.

But don't you think it's wasteful to let Mother Nature burn up all her nice trees? We could prevent this waste if a few people who had the power to do something cared about trees as much as I do. Why not set up a plan that would keep Mother Nature destroying them on such a regular basis?

You can see that it would be prohibitively expensive to dig a grid of canals through every threatened forest in the United States, but there is a simpler solution, and you can help.

If you really love trees, if you really want to protect our environment, write to your senator and the President. Suggest that they set up a government program that would pay lumber companies to clear-cut 600 foot fire breaks around every square mile of forest. If you have a simpler solution, please let me know.

~

Did you see that dog on TV who inherited 65 million dollars? According to Bill, The Almost Perfect Woman's father, they invested the 65 million for the dog and now he's worth 100 million. This dog lives in a fancy house. But I got to thinking that he's still a dog, so I said, "Bill, would a dog worth 100 million sniff another dog's rear end?"

And Bill said, "A dog worth 100 million can do anything he wants."

~ Social Commentary ~

Psychologists have discovered that when you hand a person an unexpected hot cup of coffee, he will drop it if he thinks the cup is a cheap one but will try to hang onto it if he thinks it is expensive. Of course, if it's boiling coffee in a paper cup that you get at one of the hamburger places, you can simply dump the coffee in your lap and never have to work again.

~

Did you see the 103 year-old Lewiston man who was shoveling the snow off his roof? He had absolutely nothing to fear. It is statistically impossible for a 103 year-old man to fall while shoveling snow off his roof.

~

Have you ever lost your keys in the sand at the beach, had your credit cards stolen from your gym locker, or left your wallet at the tennis court? If these unfortunate situations sound familiar, then perhaps you ought to give up sports.

~

People in Knox County understand children. They are not intimidated when little visitors appear in their kitchens. When a certain two year old comes to call on a friend of mine in St. George, she simply takes a handful of raisins, scatters them on the floor and says, "There, that'll keep him busy."

~

Julian Rubenstein says that fools are our greatest natural asset. They provide for the natural redistribution of wealth.

~

Any number of up-to-date soul enriching philosophies are now available to anyone able to turn on a radio or TV. The latest one to capture my

attention was touted by a man in California who had taken the mystery out of his life by consulting chicken bones.

A middle-aged woman, who very wisely brought her problems to the bones, reported that her husband had run off with a seventeen-year-old girl.

Then, realizing his mistake, he had repented and come home for a thirty-day breather, only to run off again with a nineteen-year-old.

The chicken bones did not hesitate, but immediately observed, "Cheer up, he's starting to like older women."

~

What do we learn from attendance figures? Does the fact that a lot of people go into a museum prove that people like art? One museum, that boasted of its fantastic attendance, discovered that when a McDonald's with two restrooms opened up across the street, attendance dropped by half.

~

I saw it on TV last Thursday. A Hollywood movie actress had to gain twenty pounds when her role called for her to play the part of a woman.

~

If your kids are starting college this fall, where in the world did they get the money to go? When I went to Gorham, tuition was $50 a semester and most any poor kid could work his way through. But now the cost of living continues to exceed everyone's expectations.

Now, there's no question but what kids need help from their parents. So if your pride and joy is five, you should start saving for that college education now. If you put $50 a week in the bank at those current generous interest rates, and do that every week until your kid is eighteen, by the year 2013 he might have enough to buy a hamburger.

~

If you are old enough, you will remember an evil scientist names Syvana who infested the comic books. He was a genius whose goal in life was to destroy society—to get things so messed up that civilization would collapse. Where are his pupils today and what are they doing?

You only have to think a minute—and you are right. They are creating the recorded telephone messages for businesses—like banks.

Did you know that there is a bank in the area that you cannot contact by telephone? Suppose you want to call your friend and neighbor at that bank to ask a question that he or she can answer with a simple YES or NO. Look in the phone book and you find an 800 number. Call it up and

a sweet little mechanical voice gives you nine or so choices—if you have a touch tone phone. If you can remember what has been said by the time you have listened to the nine choices, you make your selection—which in turn gives you several more choices. You repeat the process—each button you press gives you half a dozen more choices. Never, never do you get a real, live human being who can answer your question or at least guide you in your inquiry.

Have you ever gone into a telephone booth and seen the telephone book ripped in half? Or see that the receiver had been ripped out of the socket and perhaps smashed on the glass? Vandals? Arnold Schwarzenegger? It was probably done by your sweet, white haired old church organist after about five minutes of "Please select one of the nine choices."

~

Many Maine businesses give away gifts to customers. Gas stations often give away bottles of soda. You can usually find free food treats in supermarkets. It has been proven that you can increase your business by giving away these inexpensive free gifts.

If you are a carpenter or house painter, you might want to consider giving your customers little trees or shrubs to plant next to their houses.

Your customers will love you. Who can deny that houses look a lot nicer with shrubs up against them or trees nearby on the lawn?

But look at the roof and sides of houses that are encrusted with shrubs or have trees towering over them. There is one up by the corner near the Warren post office that is a classic example of rot and decay. Or, if you're like most of us, you can look at your own house.

Nothing rots out a house like the shade from a beautiful oak. Nothing peels paint from a house like a nearby flowering shrub.

When you house painters give your customers beautiful little trees and shrubs, you're just like the lobstermen who return short lobsters to the sea. You're planning for your future.

~

In a letter to the editor of a Maine newspaper, I read that in the past tweny-five years the earth has lost 500 million trees, 400 billion tons of topsoil and gained 1.5 billion people. The letter writer suggests that we solve the problem by getting children to plant trees.

Is there another solution? Were you to suggest that the primary problem is overpopulation and that anyone having more than one child should be cut off from all government aid and heavily taxed, most people would probably think that you were crazy.

~

Remember the old movies like The Mummy's Curse? From time to time there'd be someone in one of those movies who never grew old—until one day when the curse struck and then they'd age thirty or forty years in one minute. In extreme cases they might even crumble into dust.

You've probably noticed the same thing in the pictures of newspaper columnists. You look a lot older than you did years ago, but check out the pictures Ann Landers and Heloise run over their columns. They still look the same as they did twenty years ago.

Never changing those pictures gives Ann Landers and Heloise an advantage over the young toothy women you see on the *Today Show* or *Good Morning America*. Because when *they* start to get crow's feet or bags under their eyes, they're out of there.

~

A northern Maine man, who walked through thirty miles of deep snow in his sneakers, says he's alive today because of his survival training. Survival training is very helpful if you haven't had any brain training, because if you've had brain training you wouldn't get caught out in a blizzard with sneakers to begin with.

~

One of my favorite books is a history about my Viking ancestors. Did you know that long about the year 1200, it started to get much colder than it had been for centuries? And every year in got colder and colder. By 1350 it was no longer safe to use the old sailing routes between Europe and Greenland because of the icebergs.

You can understand that this caused a great problem at the time, because back then nobody knew enough to blame it on global warming.

~

I read that animal rights activists are concerned because some of us cook lobsters. People would suffer if boiled in a pot. Therefore, lobsters would suffer if boiled in a pot.

A study at the University of Maine determined that lobsters don't feel pain when cooked. We can't argue with scientific proof that people are, indeed, different from lobsters.

They made their point. Oh, if they'd only left it alone right there. But these researchers had to take it one step further, and that blew them right out of the water. Listen, as I read this newspaper quote about lobsters: "Some of the more complex reflexes such as feeding and copulation occur even when the brain has been removed."

~

When I entertained at a trade show in Manchester, New Hampshire, I got to spend a whole day visiting the booths. I saw some preserves that had a "No Preservatives" label on them, and asked the girl how you could preserve without preserving.

She said, "I cold pack."

And I said, "That's interesting. I have some rhubarb in my cellar that Aunt Ami cold packed for me in 1970. But I wouldn't eat it after twenty-six years in my cellar, would you?"

And she said, "Well, I drink wine."

~

I stopped in to Moody's Diner about 2AM last week on my way home from that trip to New Hampshire, and in the booth right behind me were a couple of high school kids who were giggling and fooling around like high school kids do. And even though I'm deafer than a post I couldn't help but hear the girl say, "Didn't your father ever tell you about girls?" And the boy said, "No, but a lot of girls told me about my father."

I couldn't help but wonder what brought them way down there from Camden.

~

A Maine man, who had decided to leave his fifty plus acres of prime wooded shore property to a land trust, was using his chainsaw to trim up fallen trees down by the water. His neighbor, who was more than casually involved with the environmental movement, noticed the activity and reported the man with the saw for illegally sawing trees by the shore.

The property owner has since decided to give the land to the Micmac Indians, with the stipulation that they use the site for a gambling casino.

~

Dogs are in the news this week. Everyone loves dogs. They're great companions for your kids.

Last week's greyhound show up in the Augusta area was well attended. There was even a little eight pound Italian greyhound there. Cutest little thing. Everyone enjoyed picking it up and cuddling it. There was also a big greyhound there who had been trained in Europe to chase live game. Of course, that kind of thing is not allowed in this country. And that big greyhound thought that little greyhound was a rabbit. We all feel sorry.

But at least, it wasn't a child. An Augusta woman was trying to get her dog—not a greyhound but one of those big black dogs that the Chinese

use to bring down bears—she was trying to get her dog to like children by getting her grandson to feed it. We feel bad for the kid, but realize that if it weren't for people who do unique things like that, there would be nothing but the horoscope and tide tables in the daily newspaper.

~

What can we do to preserve our natural resources? Start paying wood choppers and clam diggers by the hour. That would be one of the greatest conservation measures ever devised.

~

An international marketing study released this week indicates that few Maine people buy English cars. This is because English cars are very small. There's no way in the world a Maine family could winter comfortably in one.

~

A friend who recently moved to Boston from New York says that he has not yet adjusted. The muggers in New York use knives, but in Boston they use guns.

~

Boston, New York and Hartford people very often laugh at those of us who live on the Maine coast, but they wouldn't be able to earn a living up here. It's too different from anything they've ever experienced. Think of the difference: here in Maine when you come back to work on Monday morning, all of your tools and supplies are still there.

~

A South Thomaston man, who went off the road in his car, jumped out and hid the beer in the woods. Well, it is the first thing most people think of when they get in an accident, isn't it? The next day he went back and looked for it. An old man watched him for awhile, and finally said, "I drank it."

In an unrelated incident, one of my friends told me that there was an accident on his lawn. The guys driving took the beer out of the car and threw it down over the banking. My friend went down and got it and stood on his lawn drinking it as he watched the police and the wrecker haul the car away.

These two stories illustrate why so many people in Knox County have scanners in their kitchens. If you can be the first person at the scene of an accident, there's a good chance you can find the beer that the driver hid in the bushes.

~

The most risky activity for a single adult in Maine nowadays is not skiing but answering a personal ad in the Maine Times. Truman Hilt showed me one that said, "woman with exceptional child..." It would be exceptional if the child was over 24 and didn't live at home.

~

A large island off St. George is being bought by the Knox County Native Conservancy as a habitat for natives.

A spokesman says that Knox County natives, especially those who at one time owned shore property, have been declared an endangered species and this is a last ditch attempt to provide them with a refuge.

~

Maine people who are behind on bank payments on their home or business no longer worry, even if the bank threatens to foreclose. We have learned that banks won't foreclose on a property that is contaminated by toxic waste—because then the bank would have to pay to clean it up. If anybody asks, tell them that you read it in Forbes magazine.

~

When I was a kid you could find old cars that nobody wanted. In 1951 Wis Kinney sold me a 1920 Model T for ten dollars. Of course I didn't have the ten dollars, but was able to borrow it from Clayton Bitler. Things have changed. People don't junk old cars in Maine today. If the motor quit in a 53 Buick, somebody'd turn it into a video rental store.

~

Are you in favor of the lobster trap limit? There are only so many counters out there. If you set 1,200 traps you might catch 1,200 counters. But suppose you only set 600 traps. You'd still catch the 1,200 counters because otherwise, 600 lobsters would have no place to go. And, as you well know, lobsters are very social creatures. They're not going to sit around outside of the trap with a sulky look in their beady little eyes. They're going to get in there where the action is. They're going to eat your bait. Having established that, think what would happen if you'd only set 300 traps. The same 1,200 lobsters would have to crowd in there. You'd have four lobsters in each trap and only haul one-fourth as many. Let's continue this logic. By setting 150 traps you would get eight lobsters in each trap. Now some of you are going to say, "Ha! There wouldn't be room enough in the trap." But you're not thinking clearly. The big lobsters are going to make room. They're not going to let the little ones in. If you know anything about lobstering at all you can see what would happen if you only set one big trap. There'd be 1,200 counters in it and you

could send your stern man out to drag it in when he finished surfing the net at 8 or 9 o'clock every morning.

~

Twice within the past week I've read front page newspaper stories about all the poor little dead squirrels you've seen beside the road. Why, these articles ask, are there so many this year. And then they give what they think is a reasonable explanation. Why do you think there are so many freshly killed squirrels out beside the road? The answer is obvious to anyone who thinks about it. Maine people have simply forgotten what it's like to live through hard times.

~

A Maine man doesn't need to look far to realize that we are well into fall. No, it's not the absence of boat trailers beside the road with only one wheel on them. And no, it's not the early morning frost, the cold rain and colorful leaves falling from maples that let the Maine native know that wind driven snow will soon be upon him. For when it's too cold to work comfortably outside, the Maine man notices, for the first time, that the year-old plastic on his foundation and windows must have crumbled in the summer sun and now needs to be replaced.

~

I got a call last week from Garland, Maine. I said, "Hello, I'm Robert Skoglund. What can I do for you?"

And the man who had called me said, "I hurt my back last year. I ain't been able to do much of anything since."

And I said, "That's too bad, but what can I do for you?"

And he said, "I live a few houses away from Gerald Lewis."

So we went on that way for awhile. I keep asking him what he wants and he's trying to tell me, without actually having to come right out and say it. I knew he wasn't trying to sell me anything, because the people who call to sell you something all have a southern accent. For some reason, people don't seem to realize that you're more likely to buy something from someone who knows you or someone in your family, or someone who has pretty near the same accent as you do.

So because he had had a good Maine accent I didn't hang up on this guy, even though he couldn't seem to tell me what he wanted.

He finally said, "I had a job as superintendent of the cemetery but gave it up. It was a dead end job."

And, of course, I was asking myself if he realized what he was saying. I thought he might have made a slip, like Mr. Farrikahn did when he was

asking each one of the million men in his audience to adopt a black man in jail. He said, "They need us out here and we need them in there."

My wife was sitting next to me while I was on the phone, and she whispered, "Who is it, what does he want?"

Well, by this time I had pried out of the fellow that he thought he had quite a bit of talent, so I said, "It's some guy up in Garland who wants to know how to be a Maine humorist."

And she said, "You start by being independently wealthy."

And the man on the phone said, "You know they put a lock on coffins before they bury people. You know what they call those locks? Dead bolts."

Well, you can see that from just the little I've told you that this man is just as good as anything that comes out of Hollywood or New York, so I sent him a little humor starter kit. He stands a good chance of making it.

~

One of my friends was dead set against the seat belt law. He said that if that seat belt law were to pass, the state would next outlaw abortions.

He's a typical, stubborn Maine man who wouldn't dare drive his own car without buckling up his own seat belt. He doesn't like to be told that he *has* to wear it, but says it's the greatest safety device in the world today. He won't even let his sixteen year old son borrow the family car—unless the kid promises that every minute he and his girlfriend are in it, they wear their seat belts.

I said, "Does he drive much?" and my friend said, "No, he parks."

~

Last fall a young man from New York City came up to visit his ninety year old grandfather in West Rockport. Every morning the old man would stuff some newspapers in the wood stove, touch her off, and let the fire roar up the chimney.

His grandson realized that it wasn't safe to let the old man live alone so he put him in a nursing home and moved into the house himself. Two months later there was so much soot in the chimney that the young man burned the place down.

~ Gramp Wiley Jumps to Conclusions ~

For years Gramp Wiley has been asking me when I'm going to have my house painted. He figured I had too much character to put on vinyl siding. The horrible truth is that I am too poor to buy it.

Gramp says he's ashamed to have such an eyesore next to his bright green trailer. And I am somewhat annoyed when the wind sucks out a loose pane of glass or when a good, long, driving rain soaks through the walls.

But for years simply making a living had to come first. For a while I tried the bush mowing and garden digging business. Yes, back then I had great hopes as a tractor driver, because when you sit down and figure what you can make driving a tractor for an eight hour day—seven days a week—you're talking a lot of money.

Unfortunately, when the sun comes up and you actually have to get on the machine and pound around, it can ruin what would otherwise be a fun day. Then there are several nasty winter months when you can't earn any money at all. That's when you do actually work eight hours a day—thinking up excuses for bankers and other creditors.

Why didn't I quit? Once in business, it's hard to imagine yourself doing anything else. Remember the two fellows who bought hay at $1.50 a bale, hauled it to the next town and sold it for $1.50? They knew they weren't getting ahead so they decided to get a bigger truck.

There's a lot of truth in that. Think about your many friends who constantly grumble that they're not even breaking even. Ask them why they don't do something else and they'll look at you as if you're crazy.

Driving a tractor does give one time to think. I'd come up with stories and poems and write them down, a line at a time, every time I turned at the end of a field. Sometimes I'd forget where I was and would chop off

small trees and shrubs my friends had planted around their homes. My reputation was getting so bad that people were tying red ribbons and signs that said, "Do Not Cut" around twelve inch oaks.

It must have been while mowing bushes in a freezing rain that I decided to become a newspaper columnist. I'd be able to make big money inside—year round. All I had to do was convince two or three hundred editors to agree to run my column and I'd be in business.

While failing at that, I used up ten years of what otherwise might have been a typical productive middle age vegetating before Sunday afternoon football. Now I know that the only opportunity one has to think is while working with one's hands. A full-time writer doesn't have time to think. This is why men who work with a shovel can lean on the handle and spit and spend hours talking about things that should be taught in schools—or written in newspaper columns. And it's why most people who call themselves writers can never think of anything interesting to say. Witness all the columns written about cats.

So even though I was working inside, I could never think of anything to say. Hundreds of editors rejected my work, observing that they themselves and their staff were producing exactly the same thing. My house continued to rot down around my ears and Gramp Wiley and my creditors wrung their hands in despair.

But then I stumbled into the after dinner speaking business. For some reason that I don't even want to know, people don't seem to care how much they pay an entertainer. Ask Bill Cosby or Michael Jackson if you don't believe it.

Within the past six months I've enjoyed what amounts to a license to print money. I've discovered that giving a talk is the exact opposite of writing a story: while speaking before a group it is essential that an entertainer have absolutely nothing of importance to say. The talk must have no beginning and no end, and the speaker must dump the entire load with an air of spontaneity soaked in sincerity and conviction. The audience must feel good about itself and the speaker when he finishes, which would be impossible if the speaker actually said anything.

Now, for the first time in my life, I am able to squander cash on home improvements. Because it's so late in the season I wasn't able to get Ken Barter to paint my house. But this morning Bill Reinhart sent down George Hall's best bulldozer man to dig up my lawn where I plan to build a new garage. I figured all the activity would surprise Gramp Wiley, and it did. He rushed over, thinking it was the FBI looking for old girlfriends.

~ Save the Pterodactyls ~

As every schoolchild knows, Einstein came up with the theory of relativity while sitting under an apple tree. Relativity wasn't something he'd wrestled with for years. Indeed, he'd never thought about it before. But when the Granny Smith crushed the great man's hat, everything became clear in a flash.

Because more men are now sitting before TV screens than at any other time in world history, the odds that at least one of them will have a great revelation flash before his eyes have never been greater. Old cobweb-covered theories will be swept aside by intuition and then be supported by science and reason.

No one was surprised to learn at a recent archaeological conference, designed to separate out gender roles in prehistory, that women were responsible for mankind's earliest major technological innovations. The women running the conference had proven that women invented pottery, horticulture, agriculture, basket making, weaving and textiles.

And it said right in the big headlines of one of those little newspapers by the check out stands in the grocery store, that Hitler was a woman and that she's still drawing a pension in Argentina. Because these are important things to know, they will probably soon be printed in up-to-date school textbooks.

So it takes quite a bit to raise the eyebrows on a man as well read as I am. But my psychologist friend Addler amazed me last weekend. When I walked into his office he was watching Dan Rather report on three whales that were obviously stranded in a hole in the ice somewhere near Alaska. An Eskimo who was being interviewed had just said, "The smart whales have already gone south—I think we could improve the gene pool by eating these," when my friend politely reached over and shut off the set.

Instead of the two or three little primal screams with which he usually greets me, Addler closed his eyes and motioned for me to be quiet.

When he looked up at me a minute or two later he smiled and very slowly said, "It's so clear—no, it wasn't the greenhouse effect. It wasn't volcanic ash. It wasn't a meteor crashing into the Arizona desert."

I nodded with understanding and said, "Oh, filter clogged on your pool again?"

"I'm talking about the demise of the dinosaurs. It's so obvious to me now. For years paleontologists have wondered why they suddenly disappeared from the face of the planet."

I said, "It's hard to survive if you weigh fifty tons and have a brain as big as a walnut."

"Under some social systems that's not necessarily so. I believe there was a time when cave men would snatch a blundering brontosaur out of a tar pit much like Larry Bird grabs a rebound. I can see primitive men throwing their warm bodies on dinosaur eggs in an effort to preserve the species. Ah, the effort—the expense of those programs. 'Mongo, it's your turn to do the mouth to mouth resuscitation.' You don't know what misery is until you've experienced brontosaurus breath."

"Imagine carrying a sabre toothed tiger 300 yards to the nearest shelter! No doubt about it—the fireman's carry had real meaning back then. Of course then you'd have to run 8,000 rabbits through a blender to nurse him back to health. Civilization was put on hold for thousands of years, as women didn't have time to invent pottery or agriculture. Think about it! Who was paying for all this as bodies got bigger and brains got smaller? Appetites grew. Compared to those times we don't know what taxation is today."

Addler took a deep breath, leaned back in his chair, pressed his fingertips together and said, "Obviously, the quality of prehistoric life suffered as a result of these expensive programs. Although men had started out in hillside villas, the dinosaur deficit drove them down into caves. For centuries it looked like nothing could be done, as during those dark days it was against the law to say anything disparaging about a reptile. Then, there was a shift in the political wind."

"A rich metaphor," I cried.

"Left to fend for themselves, the dinosaurs perished. Which reminds me that some of my bird-watching friends are presently trying to settle some puffins on an island off the Maine coast. An otter was eating the puffins, so the bird people asked the state to send out one of their animal control officers to trap it. They told me, with unconcealed distress, that they'd learned that this fellow also traps coyotes for sheep farmers. The coyote, you know, plays a unique role in the ecosystem and they don't think it's right to mess with nature."

~ Pets Raise Latchkey Kids ~

My next-door neighbor Gramp Wiley sees far beyond the words that are printed in the papers. If he lived in Washington, D. C. he'd probably have his own news analysis program on CBS. I can easily see him folding up the loose sheets on his desk as he pleasantly says, "And now back to you, Dan."

But because he lives on the other side of the lilac bushes on my south line, Gramp is no more than a unique, perceptive neighbor whose keen insight will never be widely appreciated.

It should come as no surprise that such a mental giant doesn't throw down the paper when he's exhausted the editorials, letters to the editor and the court record. Indeed, Gramp knows that some of the most insightful social commentaries promulgated by the press today come under the headings of "Eek and Meek," "Herman" and "Blondie."

When I entered his trailer the smug look on his face told me that he had just rolled over a fresh mossy rock in his search for truth.

He waved me into a chair and tapped the newspaper with his finger as he said; "Heloise claims that pets are great for latchkey kids. There's ten million little tykes in the United States who come home to lonely, empty houses."

"A kitten or a puppy would be just the thing to drive the blues away," I said.

"That's what the Pets Are Wonderful Council says. I see it as a welcome return to traditional values we have not enjoyed since the Middle Ages when body warmth from cows and horses actually heated homes."

"Litter boxes will take on whole new dimensions."

"With both parents working, care of the child is now left up to the pets." Gramp Wiley leaned back in his rocker and closed his eyes. "I can remember back when only Tarzan could claim to be raised by animals."

My chin dropped as I said, "Of course. That accounts for the hair styles and behavior I've seen displayed by young people lately."

Gramp nodded. "People who ask why Johnny can't read can now wonder about his sudden fascination for fire hydrants."

"Now that pets are role models, absent parents had better choose them with care."

Gramp pounded the arm of his rocker and shouted, "Right. Pets will determine the course of your child's life. Suppose you wanted your son to be a condominium salesman."

My eyes opened wide. "A bulldog?"

"Want him to become a lawyer? Get him a weasel."

"So he can ferret out the truth," I cried, immediately grasping Gramp's meaning.

"Want your kid to grab headlines in the *National Enquirer*?"

"Wolves," I gasped. "Every kid raised by wolves since Romulus and Remus has been featured in the Enquirer."

Gramp nodded again. "Clinton's economic programs did away with the wolf at the door—he's now inside raising the children."

"Rabbits?"

"Pandas are really much better role models for kids."

"But they're almost extinct," I cried.

"You're right—good role models are going to be hard to get. Horses worth their salt will be out running around at Saratoga on weekends. Beavers will be cutting timber and building houses. The more worthless and useless the pet, the more it stinks up your house, the easier it will be to get."

"Cats."

Gramp waved his hand at me. "You don't even notice the inevitable stink created by a cat if you live in it long enough. Your friends think of it as being a part of you."

"And even your best friend won't tell you that the stench in your house could bring tears to the eyes of a zoo keeper."

"Then there's the poor kids whose parents can't afford brown eyed pets."

"They'll be raised by snakes and spiders," I gasped. "You know, Gramp, I always wanted a three-toed sloth."

"Just as well you didn't get one. There's already enough people in this country working for the government."

~ Worry ~

There's something wrong with my friend Greensleeves. Since he started selling real estate he thinks that everything is wonderful in this best of all possible worlds.

Many's the time I've heard him say, "There is no natural misery anymore. We've tamed nature. No longer are men slain in battle or eaten by wolves. Because our traditional adversaries are gone we've had to create artificial new ones to fear and hate, like the rows of faceless bureaucrats who eat oily sandwiches as they press our destiny into computer keyboards."

I've argued that there are many real things to worry about today. "If you want to be up to date with your worries, look in magazines," I'll say. "There's dry skin, high cholesterol, divorce, cancer, aluminum in your antacids, gray hair, nerve deafness (which means that you can hear but not understand), grease on your dishes."

I take a breath, and continue.

"Saturated fat, bathroom grime, sexual static in marriage, plaque, unpopped kernels in your popper, smoke from brush fires, rough chapped hands, heart attacks, stress, unbalanced diets, lack of quality time, heartburn, upset stomach, diarrhea, pain, parachutes that don't open, and drugs."

Actually, the list of manufacturers who profit by calling our attention to real or imaginary problems with their magazine ads is endless. My friend knows that sinus problems, dirt, odors and bladder control are now also fashionable enough to warrant full pages in color.

Greensleeves smiled and said, "I don't see that advertising does any harm. What is an ad but fleeting images, symbols, words? There is more substance and meaning in the wind. Advertising proves that our present ability to communicate electronically is directly proportional to our present inability to have anything to say."

"Technical advances do have a way of becoming meaningless," I agreed.

"When Big Brother is able to watch everybody, he's going to be disappointed at what he sees. We might be living in an age that floods us with information, but, not to worry—most of it is irrelevant."

I said, "These are complicated times,"—always a safe observation.

"True. Sometimes, however, even I am surprised," he confessed. "The other day I hired a schoolboy to stack some wood and when he told me his name, I made the mistake of saying that I knew his father. It seems that I didn't—his father has a different name, which led to a complicated discussion of family and self-help groups. I felt like a great weight had been placed on my shoulders. I remember back when you could ask a kid what his father's name was and you could expect a relatively simple answer—unless he was from Wales or Czechoslovakia."

"Never ask a question unless you know the answer," I said.

"Yup. I had started to trace out his genealogy in the sand beside the woodpile—just to see if I could get it straight—when it got dark and his parents arrived to take him home."

"Back when I was a kid we'd simply go to work and you could just throw us a quarter," I said.

"Kids have never had it better. Most of them don't even have to work today—their parents see that they want for not."

"That doesn't seem to distress you," I cried. "You're probably so up to date that even if your friends swapped wives, it wouldn't bother you."

"Wrong. I'm all against swaps," he snapped. "There's nothing like a nice clean divorce for the real estate business."

~ The Women's Club ~

The last time I visited my friend Greensleeves, he was arranging some dried grasses in an old Sanka coffee can wrapped with tinfoil.

"That's wonderful," I exclaimed with envy. "Where did you ever learn to arrange grasses?"

Greensleeves fingered the crocheted edge on his tablecloth and said, "The same place I learned to do this—at the Women's Afternoon Tea Club."

"You mean...?"

"They've finally opened their doors to men." My friend's eyes shone as he spoke. "I've been wanting to get in there for years."

"The time wasn't right until now," I observed.

"We're living in the best of times," he cried. "Oh, if things had been like they are today back before my wife ran off with a real man. You can't know how my hands ached to do the dishes."

"That was woman's work back then."

"Yeah. After eating a fantastic meal I'd have to watch some silly sports thing on TV while Stephanie had all the fun out in the kitchen."

"You were vegetating before the screen while she was actualizing her womanhood—growing as a complete, well-rounded person."

Greensleeves clenched his teeth and shook his head. "Years of my life wasted before the tube—when I wasn't working from nine to five."

"You were only getting money."

"And Stephanie was having fun at home. You can't believe how trim and taut she was."

"There's something about splitting wood and scrubbing floors on your hands and knees that keeps you in shape," I agreed.

"And there was nothing I could do."

"At the time."

"At the time," my friend repeated. "Oh, we've come a long way in the past fifteen years. I can remember watching her pluck the turkey."

"You held his feet at the critical moment," I said encouragingly. "You were trying to get in there even back then."

"But society wouldn't have allowed a man to do it. A man simply didn't do women's work. She had to stuff the turkey and prepare all those dishes all by herself. I leaned against the door jamb with my thumbs hooked in my belt feeling useless."

"You could have smoked," I said accusingly. "It would have given you something to do with your hands."

"You can't believe how happy my hands have been since that court order got me into the women's club. I've learned to sew, knit, bake pies and make afghans."

"You've probably met a lot of nice women, too," I hinted.

Greensleeves looked surprised. "Oh no. The women have all joined some service club that meets at the same time. The only people in my group are former Rotarians."

~ Building in Maine on a Retirement Budget ~

According to a recent article in our favorite down-home, nostalgic, glossy magazine, building or restoring a Maine home for retirement is an exhausting challenge. It goes without saying that anyone planning to retire here hails from some distant city—a Maine native smart enough to be able to quit work before he dies is smart enough to retire somewhere else where the living is easy.

Typical of our new neighbors is Sayward Vaughan, recently retired Chairman of the Board at Time Incorporated. "Way back in the late fifties we knew we wanted to retire here," Sayward recalls. "But real estate prices were high—way beyond reason. We couldn't see paying twenty-five thousand for a small stone cottage on the shores of Lake Camden, where the mountains slope to the water, surrounded by only a few dozen acres. That was almost as much as I was making in a year back then," he chuckles. His wife Alice nods eagerly. "Father advised us to wait until real estate prices went down. He'd converted grandfather's old railroad stock into cash in 1928 and then bought downtown Phoenix and Miami Beach in 1936. Father had his eye on Boston Common and Yellowstone National Park—waiting for another crash—the day he died," she adds with a sigh.

The Vaughan's struggle to create an ideal retirement home with limited resources resembles that of countless other couples like them. Upon purchasing a small farm, they continued to spend weekends and vacations here, looking, all the time, for that magic spot.

"From time to time we'd see what we wanted," Sayward says with a bittersweet smile, "but there was always the money problem gnawing away at us—Henry, Tom and Herbert were attending Harvard, and Beatrix and Abigail were at Vassar. The cook and our maids were always asking for higher wages until we simply couldn't afford what we wanted in a retirement home."

Alice pats his arm and adds, "He was so strong and cheerful through all of it—absolutely refused to touch father's principal."

The decision to purchase land and build their own economical retirement home was made when Alice inherited a rug from her aunt.

"We simply had to build a house around it," Sayward exclaims. "Where can you find a living room that will accommodate a thirty-six by sixty Kerman prayer rug? Grandfather Morgan won it from a sheik so we weren't about to cut it down to fit or roll up one end—as some of our friends have done in similar circumstances," he adds lightly.

Building was a challenge as the Vaughans planned to stay within the limits allowed by their modest six figures retirement income. It is a credit to their individuality that they flatly refused to dismantle, transport and then refurbish here a decaying barn found in Plattsburgh, New York.

"I've seen our closest friends have carpenters work for a month," Alice notes. "Then they decide they don't like the way something looks and have the men tear it all out and start over again. We don't have that kind of money, so we simply stayed out of the contractor's way for six months. He told us that alone saved us over $40,000 in construction costs. And the weather really was a lot nicer in Palm Beach."

~ Dealing with Stress ~

My psychologist friend Addler is thriving in our fast-paced, demanding world. His swimming pool is the profit from innumerable nervous breakdowns—his BMW is fueled by stress.

"Where would you be," I once asked him, "if it weren't for the bounties of human misery?"

Addler leaned back in his black, stuffed chair and smiled. "Probably still teaching school. That's where I learned about stress."

"But teachers don't do anything but sit at the front of a classroom all day and watch kids whisper and daydream," I cried. "If they feel any stress at all it's in deciding whether to go sailing in Mexico or skiing in Switzerland during their fat two-week Christmas break."

Addler gnawed at his cigar. "Why don't you get on the school board? You sound like one of the more liberal members. As a former teacher I can assure you that stress is created and carefully nurtured by the school administration."

I'm a great believer in freedom of speech—unless someone is saying something I don't agree with. I pointed my finger at Addler and shouted, "You have a sick, twisted mind. You're probably one of those communists who supports sex education in the schools and birth control, too."

Addler blew some cigar smoke in my face as if he were about to steal honey from a hive of bees.

"Stress," he quietly said, "is caused by lack of control over one's environment and teachers have been stripped of all authority. Salary indicates status and, for value received, teaching is certainly the most underpaid profession in this country today. The only young people now going into teaching are those not smart enough to get into medicine, law or engineering programs, or rich kids, ashamed of their inherited brains and money, who hope to punish their parents by flaunting downward mobility. Today's schools are run like sweatshop factories. If a worker can make fifty shirts in an hour, fifty shirts must be produced every hour for

minimum wage. If management suddenly discovers that workers can produce fifty-five shirts, they raise the hourly quota to fifty-five. The same scheme is now used in schools—find out how many classes teachers can handle and then give them one more."

"That's what we pay teachers for," I cried.

"Everyone understands why truck drivers and airline pilots are limited in the hours they are allowed to work. Someday a brilliant social scientist will prove that teachers and students are also human—they can only stay alert and receptive for so long. After that, you're asking for stress and burnout."

"What do kids worry about?" I asked.

Addler pressed his fingertips together and leaned back in his chair. "Having too much responsibility at home or school, not enough money, parents who fight and parents who drink or smoke. But we are coping. Relaxation techniques have been introduced in some of our better schools."

"A kid who split wood after supper never had trouble getting to sleep," I mumbled.

Addler ignored me and continued. "Progressive relaxation involves tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups. A class of 20 male students lie on mats in a darkened gymnasium and listen to soft music while a reassuring woman's voice goes through the procedure step by step."

"You're breaking brave new ground in physical education," I cried. "Just thinking about your program made me forget how upset I was about birth control."

"Learning to deal with stress is good for everyone. I personally enjoy unwinding by watching my oldest kid play varsity football. What a build—only fifteen but already 180 pounds of rippling muscle."

I said, "I've read that football injuries among high school players average sevety-eight injuries for every one hundred players, with about twenty out of every hundred experiencing a concussion every season."

Addler threw his cigar at me and shouted, "She enjoys it and that's all that matters."

~ Implementing The Curriculum ~

According to my friend Eddie Cator over at the Capital, education reform is in the wind: a new curriculum is about to be implemented.

"Will the kids want to feed it when they get it?" I asked.

My friend smiled. "A curriculum is nothing more than a plan—an outline of what is to be taught in lessons and how it is to be taught."

"How come teachers don't learn what to teach and how to teach it when they're in college? I thought that's what teachers' college was for."

"Colleges are all different. There is a danger that some teachers might be better prepared or smarter or more creative than others. The curriculum insures that the bad ones are teaching the same lessons as the good ones."

"It would also bring the good ones down beside the average ones," I observed.

"A good twelve-year curriculum before they go to college would take care of that," my friend cried. "That's the point of the whole thing. All students would be dragged up or down to exactly the same level by the time they got out of high school."

"Why is everyone supposed to be exactly the same nowadays?" I asked. "I've heard that the average woman does not earn as much as her average male counterpart, so all kinds of legislation is being passed to make women equal. But everyone knows that statistically speaking, short men do not make as much money as tall men. There was even a show on TV about it the other night. They've figured out exactly how many thousand dollars more a man makes a year for every extra inch he is in height. Women make less money than men because they are shorter than men—not because they're women. But you don't see short men crying for legislation that would get them the same pay as tall men."

My friend revealed that he'd been in the education business for years when he said, "They could cut a couple of inches out of the tall guys' legs."

"Equality through implementing the curriculum seem to be the buzz words in education now."

"Lesson plans are where it's at."

"What happens when good teachers sneak the official curriculum guide aside and teach from their own plans?"

"There is no place in education for anarchy. We must all work together and implement the curriculum—for the good of the children."

I said, "I've heard that some of the people who write those things barely squeezed through college. Then, when they couldn't make it as classroom teachers, they found a warm niche in the bureaucracy. Most of their time is spent in writing letters to other bureaucrats, holding interdepartmental meetings, and generating piles of paper stained with cigarette ashes and coffee grounds. Why should they be telling excellent teachers what to do?"

"An imposed change challenging the psychological readiness of the instructional organization to implement the new curriculum can hardly be considered negative posturing."

I couldn't agree with my friend. "Think of some famous great teachers," I cried. "Where would we be today if Jesus Christ had refused to give his Sermon on the Mount when he realized that it wouldn't fit in with lesson plans approved by the state? Can you imagine Socrates handing in a list of the audio-visual aids and enrichment activities employed in each dialogue unit?"

"Actually, since you mention it, there is some small opposition to implementing the new curriculum as it stands."

"Who in this country would dare speak against mandating mediocrity?"

"All the good teachers."

~ The humble Farmer's Flights of Fancy ~

At six o'clock in the morning I was the first person in line at the Bangor International Airport. The baggage inspectors had just assumed their stations and, as I saw one snap on a pair of rubber gloves, I shuddered and said to myself, "My, these fellows certainly intend to be thorough."

~

And now. The humble Farmer strange and mysterious question for the week. How come you can now buy your ticket on line and print out your airplane boarding pass at home, but if you show up at the airport without your boarding pass, they won't give it to you until four hours before your flight?

~

Here's an announcement I heard down at the Portland Jetport. "Someone has left a belt at security. Please come and claim your belt." Does this concern you? If they've already got your belt, can there be any question what they'll have next?

~

Wouldn't you like to find it in airports when you travel? I'm talking about a little hole in the wall where you could stick your head outside and breathe clean air. Here in Maine we now have clean air in restaurants and in our airports and we now take clean air for granted. But I was unable to draw a comfortable breath for several days after spending four hours in the Pittsburgh airport. There was an ironic automatic announcement that came on every few minutes: "Welcome to Pittsburgh, a smoke free terminal. Smoking is only permitted in eating and drinking establishments." Isn't that nice? When you walk up the gangway from the

plane you get hit by a blast of cigarette smoke. And you can't draw a breath of air until you fly out of these third world country terminals where people smoke in restaurants and bars. You know very well that employees are also smoking out back in kitchens and utility rooms. Think of the millions of people who will get sick and perhaps even die before their time just because there are still places in this enlightened country where people still have to work in smoke all day. How many politicians have you heard say, "If I'm elected, I'll do everything I can to improve the health of people in our great country by working to ban smoking in public places." You could promise to blow up the world, make us hated by billions of people, and rob the poor, but- if you had banned smoking in public places the last time you had held an elected office, I would plaster your name on my Model T and work for your reelection. My irrefutable argument would be, well, here's the only candidate with a great health program. Anyway, in third world country airports you can buy food and books. If people are still going to be permitted to smoke there, why not also a ventilated room where, for $20 an hour, you could huddle with others seeking fresh air?

~

Because my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, does all our shopping, I seldom get to see the magazine covers that are displayed by the check out counter. So I enjoyed looking at covers in the San Antonio airport. I found some of them hard to believe. If you look at the cover of this month's *In Style* magazine, you'll read: "67 Looks to Flatter Your Shape. Great Bags at Every Price."

If you keep your eyes open in the airport, you can inherit a fairly recent newspaper. Here's a couple of typical items from the economic news pages: Good news if you earn over $200,000 a year. Fewer wealthy people are paying taxes. Nearly 3,400 of tax returns reporting incomes of $200,000 or more showed they owed no Federal income tax in 2001, which was a 45% increase over the year before. Their tax lawyers are getting better and better.

Then, US Air pilots just agreed to 300 million in annual wage and benefit cuts. The deal also requires pilots to fly more hours a month for the same pay. While getting into a plane at the San Antonio airport I asked a man who was next to me in line why this airline was still in business while so many of the other airlines were cutting salaries and doing away with workers' benefits. And he said, "Oh, these people don't have any benefits."

~

How do you know when a group of individuals has power? Oh, they can raise or lower the price of gas as it suits political expediency. They can take me to jail if I drive eighty in a fifteen mph school zone. They can

obstruct scientific research. This is small potatoes, kid. Our political and religious leaders don't know what real power is. FBI, CIA, Randy Nichols and the Maine State Police? Pah. Nada. Let's talk about the folks who do have power.

"You can't form a line up here by this lavatory." That's what the stewardess said over the intercom. "You sit in your seat and you come up here one at a time." What do you think about that? No longer can two people stand in line in the forward part of an airplane. Unless you travel by plane, you have not experienced many of the social inconveniences necessitated by 9-11. I'm talking power here. Not only have they caused us to take off our shoes before entering an airplane, but Al-Qaeda is now also dictating the movement of our bowels.

~

Last week while I was seven miles up in an airplane somewhere between Norfolk and Detroit, a young man came along with his food cart and asked if he could get me anything. I said I'd like a ginger ale. He said he'd have to go get it. I couldn't stop him, so while he was gone I filched a 7 Up out of his wagon and had it half down before he got back. You wouldn't have done this, and because I didn't want to appear ungrateful, I thanked him profusely for his effort. But because he was young, I obligated to point out that there is no difference between 7 Up and ginger ale. No one can tell the difference. An hour later either one of them gives you a sickly, sticky feeling in your mouth. And this Pepsi-Coke war has always amazed me. The only difference is the paint on the outside of the can. James Bond is the only living human being who can ascertain the nature of a liquid by its smell and taste.

~

Yesterday morning my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, and I boarded an airplane in London and flew to Boston. There was a nice young man sitting next to Marsha, and naturally she had to ask him what he did. He was not a spy. We travel on airplanes quite a bit, and I think it is interesting that we never get to sit next to people who say, when you ask them what they do, "I am a spy." Statistically speaking, wouldn't you think you'd get to meet a spy at least once in every forty or fifty international flights? If you've watched any spy movies at all, you know that half of every spy movie consists of a spy-infested airplane taking off in Istanbul and landing at JFK with smoking tires. You know how it always shows the tires smoking in spy movies when those planes touch down. After I'd thought about this for a while, I mentioned to Marsha that I thought that I would make a good spy. I'm such an inconspicuous plain looking old man that no one would ever suspect me. I could get away with anything.

And she said, "What are you talking about? You're the only person I've ever traveled with who has had a sandwich bag checked by security."

~

Last week I heard of a girl in Friendship who flew to Los Angeles to spend a weekend with her boyfriend.

I'm sure that there are girls in Los Angeles who flew to Maine last week to see boyfriends.

Why should travel be the only solution to spending a weekend alone? Isn't there an agency that could have made all four of these young people happy without needless travel? Only the airlines would oppose it. This idea is not original. If you're over forty you can probably think of many of your friends who realized the opportunities in similar programs years ago.

~

Where do people get the idea that children are expensive? On a recent flight from Portland to Washington, I sat next to a woman with a six month old in her arms, and all the little critter ate the whole trip was a tinfoil peanut wrapper and a large white envelope. Danny Fogg says that if everybody in town was to have two or three of them, it would extend the life of a landfill by thirty years.

~

What I don't like about Portland airport is that people who sit around in there are stingy. I mean they are tight! I love to read that *USA Today* paper, and although I must have seen tweny-five people reading one in the airport, it was two hours before I could get my hand on one that someone had dropped. I did see a girl stuff one in a trash bin, but before I could get it, someone had thrown half a cup of coffee on it.

~

Those hot sticky days are here with us again. The temperature is creeping right up around 58–60 degrees, and summer has finally come to Maine.

And once again it is time for that unique event found nowhere else in the world—the Maine lawn sale.

Now I am personally in favor of lawn sales. It's the only thing in Maine that the legislature hasn't regulated. It's the last vestige of free enterprise left in America today—unless you count the Mafia.

If you're from New York or Boston and you've just moved up here, so you can live life like it should be, you might be tempted to have a lawn sale—so you can blend in with the natives.

You might decide to have the sale all by yourself on your own front lawn. Or you might get together with some of your friends or neighbors just so you can advertise a 3 FAMILY LAWN SALE. Or a super 6 FAMILY LAWN SALE. The more families you get to join you, the more impressive it sounds and the more of a crowd you're likely to draw.

Here's how the Maine lawn sale works. To begin with, you have to have some things that are absolutely worthless. It might be clay ducks someone gave your second wife for a wedding present. It could be toys that your kids have broken or outgrown. Be sure to include that exercise bike that you never did have time to use. You pick a day for the sale and advertise it in *Uncle Henry's*, and on TV. You can't believe what one ad on Channel 9 will do for you. Go around the neighborhood a week before the sale and nail hand printed cardboard signs on telephone poles. Put up a lot of them, because most of them will blow away or get wet and fall apart. The night before, drag all the treasures over to the appointed place and store them in a barn or garage. If you don't have a storage place, put it on tables and tie it down with blue tarps.

The day of your great sale arrives. You get up at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and drag all your treasures out on the lawn, or take off the blue tarps.

Now, it really doesn't matter what time you advertise a sale, because professional lawn sale goers will be tearing at it like raccoons on a box of garbage an hour before you're ready. If you advertised your sale to start at eight, the grim-lipped professionals will be digging for the treasures under your tarps at seven.

All this sounds harmless enough, but there is a very great danger in having a lawn sale—it's rain.

Do you have any idea what happens if you and six of your friends have been hauling stuff to your house steady for a week and then, on the day of the sale, it rains?

You can't hesitate. You have to load every bit of it on a truck and haul it to the dump. Right then! Don't think you can sell it the following weekend, because by then everything will be soaking wet and shopworn. Nobody will even look at it. Another danger is, that once you've started a collection on your lawn, people will drop things there during the night, and before you know it, people will be mistaking you for a native.

The summer will pass. Your collection will grow daily, and not until October, when the leaves turn to gold, will your rusted metal blend in with the fall foliage.

~

A woman, who lives just down the road a bit from here, ordered a bowl of fish chowder in a Thomaston restaurant, but when she got it she couldn't find the fish. So she made them take it back and put fish in it.

Can it be that she had unrealistic expectations? Should she expect to find fish in a bowl of fish chowder? My neighbor says that it's more than a case of a careless cook, and I am inclined to agree that there are deep, dark social forces at work here.

Think about it. How much fish do you have to hide among the potatoes in a chowder before you can call it fish chowder? And why should we expect Thomaston people who make fish chowder to have standards that exceed those of the people who make that canned chicken soup you get in stores?

Perhaps you're familiar with canned chicken soup. There are chickens walking the earth this minute who could have survived most of the canned chicken soup you find on store shelves today, and when people discover that chickens have rights, you'll be lucky to find a bullion cube in there to flavor the noodles.

It's obvious that fish also have rights. But, as that St. George woman said, "Why is it that so many of the fish rights people seem to be making chowder in my favorite restaurants?"

~

Are you tired of the new language where old people are senior citizens and bald men are hair challenged?

After hearing an interview with a Downeast fisherman on TV last week, I am convinced that this kind of language has now permeated every corner of our society. When asked by the reporter why his boat sank, the fisherman said, "It got into a negative buoyancy situation."

~ The Newspaper Column Venus ~

According to this morning's Reuter news service, the Swedish housewife 'species' may be doomed to extinction.

Like one of my neighbors gearing up to write a letter to the editor, "I read the column with interest," because it looked like the type of story that could be elaborated upon and distorted for my own selfish purposes.

And, sure enough, it was. Everything I needed for a commentary on modern times was there: the liberation of the housewife—please explain to me, with small words, why she delights in rising at 5AM to fight traffic and earn ulcers in the business world like a man. The men who were supposed to help their liberated partners with the housework—they haven't. The low-income women who are hired by high-income women to do menial chores—doesn't somebody have to do it? The children, abandoned in state nurseries by yuppie parents—it has been proven that if you can build a big enough barn there is a profit in raising chickens. And best of all, they'll all dress out at exactly the same weight. Our consolidated school system is a product of the same thinking.

But this morning's mail also delivered up a letter from Pete, a newspaper publisher in Maryland. After several years of thinking about it, Pete had decided to run my column in his newspaper, and two weeks ago he requested a fresh batch of Gramp Wiley stories for perusal.

The columns I mailed him, however, were not the friendly humor he had expected. Inspired by world news, my stories about Santa Claus and Rambo were, "well, too sophisticated. Just a little too bitter." He offered to send them all back.

Bitter. How in the world could anyone end up with a bitter story by simply ruminating something read in a newspaper? Reflect with me over the past year. Is there anything bitter or unusual about pinning a picture of a naked minister, seated on a blanket in the woods, to a church door?

As I recall, the photo was taken by one of the Audubon people, stalking a strange new bird.

And then there was poor little Bobby, whom I fired because he ran over my garden hose every time he mowed my lawn. He wasn't a bad boy, but our employer-employee relationship simply wasn't working out the way I'd expected it would when I hired him.

But, being right in step with the times, Bobby sued me, saying that he was doing a good job and that I had no right to fire him. Of course he said he'd drop the suit and quietly go away if I'd slip him a year's wages.

This is certainly a curious story and one which might not be believed by those unfamiliar with fiction in this day and age, but there isn't anything bitter about it.

High fashion has recently occupied some of this space. Remember the young husband who complimented his wife's beautiful soft flowing tresses?

Horrified that she was starting to look good, the young wife rushed to her hairdresser for a forty-dollar up-to-date chop and frizz-tease job.

With a chuckle, I observed that hairdressers would starve if it were fashionable to wear hair a bit longer. They won't be happy until women come in daily for a head shave.

Remember my story about the teen aged girl who discovered she could save her parents forty bucks and still look exactly like all the other girls by sticking her head in a bucket of cold water and then rubbing her hair briskly with oily rags? The sheep dog look is in, although I suspect that, in the privacy of their own homes, young girls fasten their hair back into ponytails just so they won't walk into doors.

A commentary on art? Perhaps you read the story of Gino, a talented but poor Italian sculptor, who was in love with a rich grocer's daughter. But the grocer refused to let the poor suitor in the house. In despair, Gino confided his problem to an American friend, Smith. Smith laughed, and, saying that money and fame would be no problem, picked up a hammer and smashed the nose off Gino's latest work—a nude woman in white marble that he couldn't even give away. Smith struck again and an arm crashed to the floor. The next blow destroyed an ear.

Leaving Gino in tears, Smith departed with the ruin and a smile.

Six months later, Rome's biggest daily reported Italy's archaeological find of the nineteenth century. While digging a well on property recently acquired by one Gino from an American named Smith, workmen had chanced upon a work of art, which, according to experts, was created by Credo Mundanus by command of Julius Caesar. Lost for centuries, the exquisite statue bears the inevitable ravages of time—a broken nose, no left arm, a ruined ear. Museums all over the world are presently engaged

in a bidding match for possession of Gino's find, which experts have nicknamed The Venus De Milo. Etc.

Bitter? I suppose so. Wish I'd written it instead of Mark Twain.

~ Telephone Tag ~

I'm reading Samuel Pepys' diary. Prying into someone's private life like this is certainly a very sneaky thing to do. But, like the *National Enquirer*, Pepys' diary is filled with factual material, which justifies my academic interest.

How sad to think that some people who keep wonderful diaries for years suddenly up and burn the whole lot of them—before they can be sold to a publishing house by grasping grandchildren.

Pepys' diary, written in shorthand, was not deciphered for 165 years. In other words, the crafty young fox—who was Secretary of the English Navy—probably thought that no one would ever read what was on his mind on that hot July night in 1662.

On a given week, his household might consist of a wife, who was seemingly always in need of physik, a wench who sat up and opened the door when he came home late at night, and a boy who ran here and there with Pepys' messages. Unfortunately, the message-boy union wasn't very well organized, for in later years the telephone companies ruthlessly rolled right over it.

Back in the 1660's Pepys was never billed for a wrong number, and if he was ever put on hold I have yet to read of it. When communications broke down, and they sometimes did, the boy—right at Pepys' fingertips—was held responsible.

In this age of instant communication our fingers do the walking. But even with a battery of phone numbers, Pepys would have trouble reaching some of his busy friends today.

To begin with, even when they are home, they're not at home. How many times have you been gnawing on a chicken leg at a friend's house when the phone rings? If the summons is answered at all, the caller is told an outright lie—he/she is not there—to call the office during business hours, or that the call will be returned later.

Answering machines are nicer to deal with because at least they're honest. And they do save lots of time because you can be sure your call will be returned without a minute being wasted. But under the worst possible conditions answering machines can lead to a game called telephone tag.

Two usually play. Sam calls Mary, a comely wench who works for his uncle, The Earl of Sandwich, and leaves his name and number on her machine. Mary comes home and calls, missing Sam, but leaves a message that she is returning his call.

Sam is overjoyed to learn that Mary has returned his call, but she isn't there when he calls. By now, however, the ice has been broken so he says that earlier in the day he saw a wrecker towing a car out of the navy office building parking lot. A bumper sticker on the car said, KEEP IT SIMPLE. He says he understands that the owner is being charged with sedition, and hangs up.

Mary gets the message, looks up the word sedition in her Oxford dictionary, and laughs as she dials Sam's number.

He isn't there, but he's proven himself to be a very witty fellow so she asks how you can tell when a politician is preparing to run for a really high office—he burns his prep school records.

According to Sam's diary, six calls later the infatuating recorded messages do their wicked work: they think they would really like to meet for a Suisse Mocha. But with the communications available today a rendezvous is impossible. Their busy schedules and answering machines would forever keep them apart. And who would ever think of having a boy hand-deliver a note?

~ Elementary Observations ~

When I entered Gramp Wiley's trailer he snapped his book shut and tried to slide it under the cushions in his stuffed rocking chair. The title, printed in gold, said, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.*

"Congratulations, that's great news," Gramp said without looking up. "I'm glad for you."

"You amaze me, Gramp. How did you know I had good news?"

"Elementary—any man your age with a gut that sags like yours has trouble coming up my three porch steps without stopping to pant for breath. You've bounced in here like an eighth grade girl heading out for a cigarette at recess time."

Gramp folded his hands and looked up for the first time before modestly continuing, "What else could you be bearing but good news?"

"How can you possibly know so much about people and the singular things they do, Gramp?" I cried. "I've never seen a topic that could stop you."

My old neighbor shrugged his shoulders. "Deduction is a science which I have perfected, of which the detection of excitement in your footsteps is but an elementary example. It is by a man's finger nails, by his clothing, by the car he drives that his occupation is plainly revealed."

"If anyone can do it you can," I cried. Then, like a child eager to see the rabbit appear from the magician's hat, I clapped my hands and added, "Give me some examples."

Gramp folded his arms across his chest, shut his eyes, and sank back into the cushions in his rocker. After several seconds he said, "Men with fallen arches and blue bags under their eyes who drive old gray Cadillacs sell mattresses. It's always the model produced just after the one with the tail fins," he mused.

"Less poetry and more facts," I begged.

"Life insurance salesmen wear a pained expression on their faces. They're constantly under pressure to explain why their premiums only go up while the benefits in their policies always go down."

"Psychologists look bewildered and confused. They dress in disheveled tweed, bite their fingernails and have nasty yellow nicotine stains on their fingers."

"You've described a real estate salesman, Gramp. You're off base on that one."

My venerable neighbor didn't even look up but quietly observed, "Real estate people dress in the uniform of the profession they were last in. Ninety-five percent of them aren't in real estate long enough to develop any distinctive style."

I knew he had me there and my cheeks flushed with shame.

"Trappers," Gramp continued, "you can tell in the dark."

"Automobile mechanics? By their greasy footprints. Never rent a house to one of them unless you plan to burn it down after they leave."

"Butchers wear neckties that are slightly frayed."

"From sliding them onto the scales when they weigh your meat," I excitedly exclaimed.

Gramp Wiley looked pleased as he continued. "School superintendents have 1955 State Department of Education regulation haircuts. Gray now, of course, but what remains is still flat on the top. Folks with axes..."

"Wood choppers," I shouted.

"...that need grinding are school board members," Gramp continued.

"Then we get down to finer distinctions. A tiny flake of gold under a fingernail could only be found on the hand of a TV preacher."

"From their bathroom faucets. Brilliant," I cried as I clapped my hands.

"Small grass clippings on pant legs are not the reliable indicators they once were years ago. Now, you know, you could be looking at the village idiot or a schoolteacher who is forced to mow lawns all summer simply to make ends meet. The one who is not smiling is usually the teacher."

"I've heard enough," I said. "There's no question but what you've advanced the art of deduction far beyond anything Sherlock Holmes ever dreamed of."

Gramp Wiley nodded and patted the book beneath the cushions. "I'll read a bit more about him this afternoon if I can find my glasses."

~ How Dry is Dry? ~

When Amy at Portland Monthly asked me for a dry story, I was reminded of an evening visit with Lawyer Crandall and Julian Rubenstein. Julian showed us a book he was reading about the good old days in Spain—when they used to burn people at the stake. According to Julian, if your friends heard you were going to be burned at the stake they would attempt to bribe the fellow in charge of the fire to use green wood. Crandall said, "What happened if they used green wood?" and Julian said, "The smoke would snuff you in a wink." Crandall said, "What happened if they used dry wood?" And Julian said: "If they used dry wood, I imagine you would desiccate rather rapidly." And Crandall said: "Gee, if it'd been me, I probably would have before they lit the first match."

What is dry? People from away might tell you that dry is a native's ability to articulate his sentiments in such a succinct and oblique manner that he becomes incomprehensible. But dry is really no more than a clever circumlocution or a punch line that doesn't need to be said.

The fewer words used in a dry comment, the better. "When some fanatics from Saudi Arabia rammed a plane into a building in New York, Bush attacked Iraq. Today there are people in Peru who thank God that the men steering the plane weren't from Ecuador."

Although it can be difficult to locate the origin of dry stories, the next two first appeared in my newspaper column. I will deny in court that they were topical commentaries on two of my neighbors.

~

Gramp Wiley said, "In 1905 Uncle Ern ran for dog catcher. Went around knocking on doors just like you'd do today, asking for votes. Everything went well until the third day when a big black dog came right through a screen door and muckled him by the leg. Uncle Ern fought off the dog and three days later he was sitting in his rocking chair with his feet in the oven when his buddy lawyer Sline dropped in. When Sline heard what had happened he told Ern that he could sue the dog's owner

$5 for the torn pants. And when he found out that Ern couldn't even walk he told Ern that he'd also sue the dog's owner $1,000 for loss of consortium."

I said, "Did Uncle Ern collect $1,000 for this loss of consortium thing?"

Gramp said, "No he didn't. When Uncle Ern's wife found out what loss of consortium was, she jumped up in court and demanded payments for the previous ten years."

My friend Winky read in the paper that they were looking for an ambulance attendant down in St. George. He applied—and he got the job. My old neighbor Gramp Wiley was not too pleased when he heard about it—he's seventy-nine years old—he's a concerned party. He said, "Winky can't work on that ambulance. Winky is stupid. He gets everything back end to. It would be just my luck to have Winky show up on that ambulance 2 o'clock some morning when I'm lying here on the kitchen floor needing a tube shoved down my throat."

Any professional storyteller knows that an open bar or wine on the banquet table kills any possible response from that story. This is why humorists beg to be introduced to their audiences before 8:30PM. If you're not underway in front of your audience by then, your best dry stories are just about as useful as extra anchors in a sinking skiff.

To be fair, here's a dry story I didn't get, and I was stone cold sober. Seems as Mrs. J approached the Dean at Bowdoin College and offered to donate a million dollars if they'd give her horse a college degree. When the Dean discussed it with the board, the money talked and it was agreed that the horse would graduate from Bowdoin. The incident warranted attention because it was the first time Bowdoin had ever given a degree to the entire horse.

A TV commercial I wrote for the Maine Seat Belt Coalition might be classified as dry. It showed my friend, Stanley French, leaning on the hood of a car in his South Thomaston junkyard. The car had hit a tree but the passenger had kept right on going. You can see tears streaming down Stanley's face as you hear my voice saying: "Nothing bothers Stanley any more than seeing a car brought in here, one of his best friends was driving without wearing a seatbelt. You know, Stanley could have sold that windshield for $65."

The late great John Gould published two dry stories that I use on stage. Within thirty years only a few anthropologists will understand the one about Mr. Cobb, the rich Boston merchant, who made a fishing trip to Rangeley every fall. One year Mr. Cobb arrived at the Rangeley Hotel to find that his guide was sick, so he asked the hotel keeper what to do. No problem. The best guide in Maine, Mr. Hoar, lived in Rangely, and he would be glad to take Mr. Cobb out on the lake. No one who saw the first meeting between these two giants will ever forget it. Mr. Cobb swaggered

up to Mr. Hoar, held out his hand, and smirked, "Mr. Hoar, hah? I suppose you know what we do with Hoars in Boston."

And Mr. Hoar said, "No I don't, but I do know what we do with Cobbs in Rangeley."

When the minister came over to Winky's farm, he did what calling clergy always do: he tried to say something good about everything.

"Nice looking cow you have there."

"Thank you sir. Thank you."

"Nice looking chickens."

"Thank you, sir.

"That's a nice looking ass you have over there."

And Winky turned all red and hid his face in his hands. The minister looked surprised and said, "What's the matter with you? Have you not read the scripture? Did not our Savior ride into town on the back of an ass? There is nothing wrong with that word and I don't you to blush when you hear someone using it. And I don't want you to refrain from using it."

Winky took all of this to heart. The next time the minister came to call, the animal had died, and Winky was out in the field with a shovel in his hands burying it.

The minister walked up to Winky and said, "Hi, what are you digging there, a post hole?

The worst thing I saw while walking around on the fair grounds up to Gray Days was sixteen, seventeen-year-old girls wearing shorts—with tattoos on their legs. You know, if they'd wait forty years they could be spared the expense.

Sometimes dry happens. All you need to do is write it down: Twenty years ago I was watching a tug of war at the Winter Harbor Lobster Festival. You might know that the tug of war is popular down on the coast because it's cheap. All they have to buy is the rope and the medical insurance policy for possible injury, and all the surrounding towns send in their champs. There were there from Winter Harbor, Bass Harbor, Bar Harbor, Pulpit Harbor, Southwest Harbor, Tenants Harbor and Beals.

Because I was at least 100 miles from home I was surprised to look up and see my St. George neighbor, Bernard Davis, standing next to me. At forty, Davis was still an exceptionally handsome fellow who traded in his Corvette and his girlfriend every year for a model with fewer miles. For half an hour we watched twenty men yank and pull on the ends of a wicked long piece of line that Teddy Kennedy could have used to anchor his yacht—or pull a car out of the water. And on each end, with the

hawser tied around their waists, were two rather substantial women who served as anchor persons. Moving either one of them would be just like pulling up an oak stump. When they finally determined who the champs were and everyone walked off to get their basket of seafood, I kicked at that hawser that they had dropped on the ground and said, "Hey Boy. I don't call that much of a contest. Tell you what. I'll go get all of my girlfriends and you go get all of your girlfriends, and that will give us two teams for a real tug of war." Davis said, "Good idea. I'll go get more rope."

In the 1950s Bernard's father, Giant Davis, bought lobsters on a dock in Port Clyde. One day a fellow came alongside at low water and hollered up,

"Hey Giant. You wanna buy some lobsters?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I wouldn't know who to pay." Giant's is the best dry story I ever understood, but it is certainly not the driest story I ever heard. You and I cannot appreciate the driest story we ever heard: we didn't understand it. Maine is full of dry people whose ability with the oblique phrase will never be applauded because mere mortals will never figure out what they really said. And here my friend, the venerable judge Sam Collins in Rockland, comes to mind. Sam is dry. Sam once said something that I had to think about for six months before I laughed.

~ The humble Farmer's Friends & Neighbors ~

You can believe that I encountered problems when I tried to include stories I wrote in the 1980s into a book to be published in 2006. Here's an example. In 1985 a rich kid house on the ocean might have been worth $250,000. To make the story believable in 2006 I have to say that the house is worth at least a million.

~

So you've moved up to Maine to retire and have discovered that it is difficult for poor old retired people from away to get a fair shake here. Your taxes are certainly higher than they should be and the natives take advantage of you as you suffer along on a fixed income.

Cheer up. I can sympathize. Newcomers have felt uncomfortable here since my great great great great great grandfather, Moses Robinson, moved to Thomaston in 1734.

So remember that you are not the first newcomer to find himself freezing to death beside the Atlantic Ocean, surrounded by hostile strangers who don't even try to understand your problem.

You are breaking new ground, however, when you complain that your taxes are $2.37 higher than they should be on your million dollar house.

~

The kids were coming to stay with us over Christmas so Marsha needed to borrow a granddaughter crib from one of the neighbors. The neighbor got the message and called the next day and asked me how tall the kid was. I said, "The kid isn't old enough to stand so she has no height. She's at an age where she only has length."

~

Gramp Wiley and I were fishing way up the northern part of the St. George River when we heard a small voice saying, "Help Me!" We looked around and saw a little frog hopping up toward us. Gram bent down and picked up the frog. And the frog said that she was really a beautiful woman turned into a frog by an evil witch. She said that if Gramp would kiss her she would turn back into a beautiful woman and do anything he wanted. Gramp Wiley picked up the frog and put it in his pocket. And I said, "What are you doing? That frog said it would turn into a beautiful woman and do anything you wanted." And Gramp said, "At my age I would just as soon have a talking frog."

~

It is possible to buy good books for ten cents or a quarter at a lawn sale. I can remember finding a brand spanking new book called "Caring for your baby and child." I mentioned to the woman selling it that the book was in awful good condition. She said, "Yes, after I had the kid, I never had time to read it."

~

My friend Dieter told me that his father survived nine years in a prison camp in Siberia. I know that you have read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and probably other accounts of prison life, so even if you have been spared this particular type of cultural enrichment, you know what was going on in Russian prison camps fifty years ago. You have to be incredibly tough to survive nine years in most anybody's prison camp, but can you think of anything that would take more out of you than a prison camp in Siberia? Years later they put him in a nursing home and he died the next day.

~

Two buzz words you might hear today are quality time. Parents are constantly urged to spend quality time with their children.

One of the reasons this is difficult to do is because nobody seems to know what quality time is.

The term has even overflowed its original parent childhood banks, and now is even used to express some mysterious relationship between married couples who have no children.

A St. George woman, who seldom sees her sixty-eight year old husband, complained that they never seem to share any quality time. The only time she sees him is when they go to bed.

~

People in Knox County have never had it better. One hundred years ago, people in Spruce Head knew how to save. Ralph Cline says that his great-grandmother Bennett was so thrifty that each spring when she cleaned out the cupboards she'd swallow any medicine that was left so as not to waste it.

To appreciate the extent of great-grandmother Bennett's suffering, one should remember that back then most popular medicines were black, gooey and eighty-five percent alcohol.

~

My wife Marsha and I were standing in the check out line at Hannaford's so we couldn't help but hear one very old woman say to another one, "I can't stand in this line. My right leg is so stiff I can hardly get it off the ground." And the other one said, "It's my arms that bother me. In the morning I can hardly eat my breakfast. And my hand shakes so I can barely get the spoon in my mouth." And the first one said, "I don't have no trouble lifting the spoon to my mouth, but it's getting awful hard to see the dish." "See the fish?" "No, dish, dish, see the dish." "I blame it on my pills. I'm taking twelve different pills which is probably why I'm always dizzy. Well, we're getting old and these little annoying things are going to happen. But let's be grateful—we can still drive."

~

Some friends invited me to attend their party at the Alumni House at the University of Maine. It was a great party, and you can see pictures of it on my web page. Although I don't know the politically correct name for one of the games we played, all it amounted to was getting 150 people to work together on a project. The people at each table were asked to glue together and decorate a gingerbread house—a challenge indeed for Maine men who find themselves without duct tape or WD 40. Of course when six people work together at one table on a project there is usually at least one who is content to sit back and watch and at least one who has to manage the operation. That's just the way things are. At one table I saw a strong argument for those of you who believe that environment shapes behavior. The house built by the Washington County crowd had a chain-fall hanging from a tripod out front, a yellow police "do not cross" tape, two dogs chained to an outhouse and a Bait For Sale sign on the front door.

~

Have you heard the ad about the vitamins that stick? I heard it. And I wondered about it. This company claims that ordinary everyday vitamins

get flushed out of your body without doing you any good. But—you want to buy their special vitamins because they stick.

I'm like you. I thought it was funny, too, when I first heard it. An organic vitamin is the same as a vitamin that's spent the winter in a chair inside a nuclear power plant..

But then I thought about it. And if you compare these stickable vitamins with some of those donuts you used to get when you were in the service, it does make sense. When I was stationed on the *Cutter Laurel* in Rockland in 1955, the cook made donuts that would hang around in your stomach for four or five days.

~

Bill Dickey was telling me about one of the local Camden characters who always used to walk around with a paper bag full of whatever he thought he'd be needing to get through the day.

And every time this character would come in to visit one of the local businessmen who owned a store, the businessman would grab the paper bag and empty it on the counter to see what was in it—just trying to be funny.

Well, you don't have to know too much about characters in Camden or anywhere else in Maine to figure out what was going to happen – sooner or later.

And it did. One warm spring day this character walked into the store with his paper bag, like he did every day, and the merchant grabbed it, like he did every day, and tipped it upside down on the scale on his counter.

And he looked at what he had dumped on that scale, and he looked up at his friend, and he looked back at the scale and said, "It looks like..." And then he said, "It smells like..." And then he said, "It is..."

~

If you've driven Route 131 between Thomaston and my house you've been past the old green Finnish schoolhouse where Gary Akers now has his art gallery. When I tell you that I went to one of Gary's shows, I don't want you to think that it was for the free food, because there was nothing there that an old Maine man would eat. Who should I see there appreciating art but Gerry Colson from South Casco. And Gerry admitted that he listens to this program and that he loves to go to Monhegan. So Gerry and I have one thing in common. But Gary Akers is a crafty artist and I like his stuff even more because he paints things that everybody can recognize, like the houses in Port Clyde or the lighthouse on Southern Island. If I were rich, I'd get that painting of Southern Island for my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, because she mows the lawn around that lighthouse all summer and paints up inside the light tower on rainy days.

But I was talking about Gary's art show. Can you tell me why the only people with money enough to buy first class paintings seem to be attracted by tiny tomatoes wrapped in bacon or spinach sandwiches?

~

I was riding with a crowd of friends in a car when we pulled into a driveway so we could turn around and go back the way we'd come. And someone sitting in the back seat, who noticed that the coast was clear both ways, said, "If you want to back up, go ahead." What do you say when the driver asks you, "Do we turn left here?" You can't scream, "Right, right, right." You have to say, "Correct" or "Ayuh." And even a professor of English at Colby would have to admit that if Ayuh is not correct, at least it's safe.

~

A friend writes: "Dear humble, You heard of the 'golden-handshake' people get when they retire? My brother calls it the 'golden handcuffs' when you are married with three kids. He is referring to the fact that he has a good-paying job but can't quit, due to wife and kids."

Thank you for writing. I'm not even going to say who sent me that letter. But this golden handcuffed man with three kids wakes up every morning delirious with joy. If I can believe what I see on television, his children serve him Cheerios in bed at five. The one great tragedy in my life is that I could never afford to have children. I have neither the smarts nor the strength that one needs to stay afloat during our occasional planned recessions. Having a child is just another way of flaunting your golden handcuffs.—"Look at me. I have such a wicked big income, even during this recession, that I can afford to have one more child."—You know the people weighted with heavy golden handcuffs in your neighborhood. They have a new pickup truck, a boat on a trailer and two snowmobiles in the front yard. And if that doesn't get out the message that they simply don't know what to do with all their excess cash, they have children. My heart cries out for these golden handcuffs when I see my many friends flaunting an upward mobility that I will never experience. There will be no squabbling to get a fair share of my estate.

~

My next door neighbor Etta just celebrated her ninety-sixth birthday. Etta was only twenty-eight and living in the same house where she lives now when I came into the world across the road. Etta's youngest grandson, The Great Ronald, who flies an airplane, was there. I knew Ronald's grandfather was something of an innovator because he used to fly over the water in a pontoon airplane looking for fish. And when he'd find two or three boatloads of fish, he'd sell them for $10,000 and then he'd use some of it to buy a forty acre point of land in St. George right on the

ocean. And I can remember that all the fishermen laughed at him when he cut up a good section of Tenants Harbor ocean frontage into little lots and tried to sell it to people from away for $7.50 a front foot. And I was thinking about this when I asked Ronald what he did with his airplane because they don't fly around looking for fish anymore. And Ronald said that he took aerial pictures and sold them. You could see the house in the picture and the barn and the dock and the lobster traps on the dock and the green pickup truck in the dooryard. And I allowed as how I could see that the man who owned that farm would pay quite a bit for that picture. And Ronald said, "Not as much as the fellow who owned that green pickup in the driveway.

~

My friend John Cushing, who belongs to the Kiwanis Club in Dover Foxcroft, just had supper with us after three months in Mississippi. And when he went home I went on line to look up hate crimes in Mississippi. I found a United States map with little KKK hoods and swastikas on it. And down south was right peppered with hate crime clubs. Did you know that you only have to spray paint a swastika on the sidewalk or on a wall and it goes on the record books as a Neo-Nazi hate crime? And when you figure how many people have mental illness or are drunk at any given time, it's surprising that we don't see more of that than we do. On the map there was one little swastika symbol on North Dakota and one in Maine. One in Maine! When I saw that it was on Matinicus, my first thought was, "How are we going to contain it."

~

My friend the Booger Boy is like so many of us in that he goes off on different kicks. His present kick is karaoke. The way I understand it, you stand in front of a computer screen that has the words to songs on it and you sing the words into a microphone while the sound system plays music to the song in the background. He told me that he went to some karaoke place the other night and went up in front of a crowd and sang a song that he dedicated to his wife. I understand that a lot of people do this, but I'm surprised that the Boy did it because he doesn't drink. But now it only takes a word, and he's off to someplace where he can stand and sing. Last week his wife took advantage of his new weakness. She asked him if he'd like to go with her and stand and sing another song for her. Of course he said he would, which is why the Booger Boy went to church last Sunday.

~

I have before me a ragged and much handled paper that says: "The Post Office has stated that material sent to you is undeliverable at the address that appears in your records." And they asked me for an address correction. Yes. Although I live in a house that was built in 1811—a house that has not moved since 1854 when oxen dragged it up there, the post office has changed my address three or four times over the past 10 years. Some people still haven't caught up with me. If you live in rural Maine, your address has probably been changed, too, so you know what I'm talking about here. You can mail to one of your seventh cousins in a metropolitan area like Cushing or Wytopitlock, he might live in the same house where his family has lived for 200 years, but if you don't have the latest address assigned to his house by the post office, it will come back to you; UNKNOWN. If you can remember when your postmaster knew and was related to everyone in town, you are probably still wondering how post office efficiency, improvements and progress, can cause anything like this to happen.

There's more. Hear this. I got an address correction paper from my brother. Although it said Robert Skoglund on it, it was delivered to the box of my brother, James Skoglund. Because I very often get things like my brother's bank statements in the mail, I have called my good friend at the post office to ask why this happens. I don't really understand it, but it has something to do with a machine in Portland where the mail is sorted.

One of the blessings of the present system is the enjoyment of opening an occasional Christmas card in the middle of March. Although there are only two Skoglunds in St. George, Maine my brother gets my mail and I get his. If your name is a common one like Smith or Jones please tell me how it's going with you.

~

I recently read on a Monhegan web page that there are only four kids in the Monhegan school. Prices for the smallest houses on Monhegan start at half a million dollars, so Monhegan is really not a place where your average young family could go to start out in life. The way I understand it, some residents on Monhegan, probably young parents, are trying to encourage young couples with kids to move to Monhegan and live out there year round. The way Monhegan is heading now, they say that soon it will be only a place for summer people and a handful of winter caretakers. Monhegan is only ten or so miles from where I was born and brought up and although I have no business saying what should or should not happen on Monhegan, I would hate to see the community die off and fade away. I like Monhegan and I like the people out there. I understand that they are trying to make year round housing affordable for young people with kids. If you are a writer or an artist, a woodworker, or any kind of craftsman, or even if you are just rich so you don't have to work—but I am repeating myself—I would think that Monhegan would be a good place to live. There are no cars on Monhegan. When the sun goes down, it is very, very dark on Monhegan. And although I go out there several times every summer to do shows, I have no idea what people do on

Monhegan after dark. There are no preschool children living on the island which suggests that everyone falls asleep immediately.

Which reminds me that Marsha and I spent our honeymoon out there. I do know that one morning last summer I awoke on Monhegan and looked out the window to see thirteen, I think it was, artists on the horizon painting the sunrise. And anyone who is up at sunrise must go to bed early.

I'd like to know more about this project to bring young people to Monhegan, wouldn't you? I'd like to know if everyone out there is in favor of bringing young families to Monhegan and setting them up in affordable housing. Would you want to live on Monhegan?

~

The other day I ran into a man who told me that he enjoyed something I said years ago. I'm sorry that I can't remember who it was so I could give him credit, but it had to do with the way a Maine man deals with trash.

Even monks who live in mountain top caves in Tibet generate trash—things that have to be burned in the stove or hauled to the dump to be recycled. Some people generate more rubbish than others. But any dump keeper in Maine will tell you that there is a basic difference between the Maine native and people from away.

For example, if someone from away hires a carpenter to remodel his house, he will instruct that person to haul all of the left over doors, planks and boards to the dump. And if you happen to be on hand when a truck full of these goodies shows up at the dump, you can do rather well.

But Maine men feel that they have to age their trash before they haul it away. They'll tear out the cracked old 1790 doors and put in nice new sliding glass ones. Or they might put in doors made of laminated fiberboard. But even though they know those old 1790 doors are worthless they can't throw them away—until they're properly aged. So they pile them out beside the barn. Fifteen or twenty years later, they'll load the rotted remains onto a truck and it down to the burn pile at the dump.

A Maine man will do the same thing with old iron. Look behind any native's barn and you'll see a pile of twisted, rusty iron. Junk men don't buy iron any more, and you might need a piece sometime to weld onto your bush hog to hold it together, so that old iron has to lay right there until grass grows over it. Only after you've ground it up with the bush hog for twenty or so summers do you haul it away.

The Maine universe is governed by inviolate natural laws, and a Maine man's inability to haul off trash without first aging it is one of them. If you ever see a native hauling load after load of trash to the dump before it has been properly aged, you can bet your bottom dollar that he just married a beautiful young widow from Connecticut.

~

Here's a letter from my friend Richard Warner who is the funniest man I know. For years he provided the substance for many newspaper columns that appeared above my name. Listen closely. "Dear humble, I read your letter in the BDN. It's a very nice example of wasting no words to convey a message...the value of which came to me too late in life. One might wonder how I ever managed to avoid learning the value of minimalism in all endeavors, given the fact that I was raised among people so frugal that they spoke while inhaling, as well as while exhaling, so as not to waste the air going in and out of their lungs. I see in today's BDN a story entitled, 'Fires shot, begs police to shoot him.' It seems that a twenty-eight-year old Rockland man appeared in front of Rockland's public safety building and fired off a round from a shotgun, in an effort to attract the attention of the police inside. Once the attention of the Rockland constabulary had been sufficiently obtained, and police officers from both near and far had arrived on the scene, he 'began yelling for someone to kill him.' He must be a newly-arrived resident of Rockland to believe that getting yourself killed by the police will get you off the city's tax rolls. Why, if it were that easy, we'd all be doing it."

~

My friend Winky hates the cold so much, he hates the misery of Maine winters so much, that he finally moved to Key West where he could be warm and comfortable. Last I heard, he found a good job down there working in a meat locker.

~

Is it nice to scare little kids? When I was very small, one heard talk of an ethereal being named the Boogie Man who would get bad children. The Boogie Man lived in dark corners and although one never saw him, we accepted him on faith. What kind of disreputable or scary person would you put right up there on a level with the Boogie Man? Do you have a neighbor who would even come close? What in the world does he look like and what does he do?

My neighbor Timmy Polky told me that we used to have one around here. When his nephew Hoggy was little, Hoggy's mother would say to him, "Hoggie, I don't know how you can walk around dressed in rags like you do. You're starting to look just like Robert Skoglund."

~

To make my radio program I work all week to find items that I hope will inform and interest you. Sometimes I am tempted to guide the direction of your thinking. Sometimes I am so overcome by what I have seen or heard that I simply unload it on you and let you decide for yourself what

it means. This next item is one of those instances. Earlier this week at a parish meeting at the church we elected my next door neighbor, Etta Hall, to serve another five year term on the board of directors. Etta is ninety-six.

~

Years ago I learned the easiest and most productive way to eat a lobster. It is an ancient lobster eating technique that I learned from Albert Robinson, who could have learned it from Holman Day up at Colby in the 1870s. Please note that I do not boast that it is the right way to eat a lobster. But any time you want me to teach you how to eat a lobster at a table in your home I will drop whatever I am doing and rush to perform before your panel of impartial judges. If they truly have open minds, they will have to agree that I do know the easiest and most efficient way to eviscerate and get all the meat out of a lobster.

~

Knowing that even my method can probably be refined, I have suggested to Chuck Kruger that some knowledgeable lobster eaters be selected to offer a staged demonstration at the next Annual Maine Lobster Festival in Rockland. To begin with, clumsy amateurs, who have ever squirted lobster juice on a person across the table, should immediately disqualify themselves. I would suggest that no more than half a dozen truly qualified people be elected so that the audience and judges could watch each authority dismember a lobster in turn and thereby judge for themselves which of the techniques, or even parts of the techniques, are the ones with value.

Because this is a demonstration designed to improve the quality of life for lobster lovers everywhere and has nothing to do with speed or gluttony, it could lend one more educational, interesting, and entertaining feature to the Lobster Festival. If you think you know the best way to get all the meat out of a lobster, and if we are permitted to put on this demonstration please ask if you might stand beside me on stage and display your skills.

~

Pick up any newspaper or magazine printed for general consumption and you will see an article, written by a white liberal, supporting affirmative action. On another page you will see an article, written by a well-educated member of some minority, opposing affirmative action. The only reason either article is in the publication is because the publisher thinks that the topic is a hot one which will generate a profit.

Turn two more pages and you will read a story about someone who has been accused of violating someone's Civil Rights—by saying naughty words. Forty years ago no one would have thought anything about saying

those words, but because human beings have an innate need for naughty words, and because the naughty words of forty years ago are no longer naughty, new ones had to be invented.

This prompts me to confess that last Friday night I found myself in a time-warp. I attended a meeting where everyone there was sixty, seventy and eighty years of age. We grew up in the 30s, 40s and 50s, and are still burdened with the values of those degenerate days of long ago. Had a member of the Thought Police been there, all of us would have gone to jail, for, without even thinking twice about it, we all stood and sang three verses of the *Too Fat Polka*.

~

Nowadays you might make your telephone calls through your computer. I do. Robert Dennison wrote the program that I use. Anyway, last summer Patty Moran gave me a Moran's Insurance hat. She also gave a Moran's Insurance hat to one of my very good friends from Cushing, who now lives far away. He forgot to take the hat with him and it's been in my office since last summer. The other day when I called to remind him he'd forgotten his hat, I noticed on the little information screen beneath his name that on January 17, 1992, he called to tell me that the end of the world was coming in 1993. People can forget things, but computers have a habit of remembering everything. And there it was on the screen. So I said to him, "Jazzman, on January 17, 1992 you told me, that the world was going to end in 1993. Have you changed your mind about that?"

And he said, "I had to."

~

I love the Common Ground Fair in Unity. You should check it out because you'd have a wonderful time. I was there for all three days last year and I plan to be there all three days next year. The Common Ground Fair celebrates living a healthy, rural life. We are talking here about people who are so dedicated to maintaining a healthy lifestyle that you have to leave the fairgrounds to buy a cup of coffee. The Common Ground Fair is about eating healthy food. The Common Ground Fair people attempt to educate their Maine friends about avoiding sprays and poisons that are harmful to the body and the environment. Many of these Common Ground Fair people are healers who can teach you how to keep your body healthy and in harmony with nature. The Common Ground fair is about the only place in Maine where you can stand in the middle of a crowd of 200 adults and children and light up a cigarette without even getting a dirty look. For the sake of my smoker friends I hope that they will not be permitted to smoke at the Common Ground Fair this year. Because—well, can you think of anything more cruel to a smoker than being allowed to light up and then discover that you have to go off the fair grounds to buy a cup of coffee? At the tail end of one Common Ground

Fair, my friend David Bright showed up at the media tent, and was helping me load my signs and rocking chair and table into my truck, when he looked over at the Whole Life Healing tent, which was right next door. And he saw a pair of abandoned crutches lying on the grass. And David said, "humble, those healers must be fantastic. Look. Someone walked away without his crutches." And I said, "David, it's more likely that he crawled off to get away from their cigarette smoke."

~

The other day I was trying to saw a six-by-six on a table saw and of course it jammed up and the motor howled and stopped. I took the motor to Bill Daggett who is ninety-two years old. When you think about it, you will realize that about the only people who know how to fix things are seventy-eight, eighty-five, ninety-two years old. Nowadays everything that can be made unfixable is made unfixable. Things are made to break and unless you were born before 1940, you throw things away without even thinking about it. If you were born before 1940, even if it can't be fixed, you put it in the garage or in the attic because even though it's worthless, you can't bring yourself to throw it away. But Bill Daggett took my electric saw motor apart and stacked the parts here and there on his workbench, and all I could think is, how in the world can he remember how to put this all back together. And I looked at him with admiration and said, "That don't scare you a bit, does it?" And ninety-two year old Bill Daggett said, "No, it's not my motor."

~

When Bruce the Goose married the young and nubile Eva, for some reason that I do not understand the Goose asked me if his mother could spend the night in our Bed and Breakfast. This is why Bruce and Eva happened to drop in on us for breakfast the next morning. Although she had been a bride less than twenty-four hours, Eva already had in her possession a formidable document she called her honey do list.

You and I have heard of the honey do list. You might have one in your house but we do not have one here. This is because our marriage has ripened. Our marriage has matured. After fourteen years of marriage my wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, finally realizes that she will probably never be able to get me to do anything.

We do, however, have another list here. It is a list that grows every time my wife points out one of the innumerable strange and unfamiliar items piled in one of my barns, and says, "What is that? Why do you need that?"

Our list is called, "I was gonna..."

~

The boys who plow driveways in St. George, Maine, always have their equipment out by the road and ready by the end of October. Most of us who live in Maine know why, because it is not unusual to have several inches of the white horror descend upon us before Halloween. The plowing machines are different this year, however. The boys who design and drive them have been influenced by their neighbor Ricky Craven, the famous race car driver. And they now believe they have a machine that will help them to make their truck payments during these tough economic times. Their plows are moved by 600 horsepower engines. On the open road, between driveways, the units are capable of speeds up to 180 miles per hour. You understand, of course, how necessary speed is, especially in the early fall. Because, if they waste even fractions of a second between their last job and your driveway, the snow at your place would have melted.

~

I live in St. George, Maine, and if the trees hadn't grown up, I could look out my living room window and see my grandfather's house 1,500 feet up the road where I was born. I feel lucky to live where I do. In Knox County, Maine about the worst thing that could happen to you is having someone forget to put the meat patty in your hamburger. How bad is that? In one of those fast food places, it could save your life. But when the neighborhood does start to slide where I live—it can reach rock bottom before you realize it. And you say to yourself you didn't realize that things were that bad right there within sight of where you live. How can you tell when your neighbor's house has reached that decrepit point of rural decay from which there is no return? In Thomaston you see the fire department burning it down. In St. George you see Andy Wyeth painting the boats in the dooryard.

~

Did you plan to spend your retirement years far from the roar of the maddening crowds? I live in St. George, Maine which has about the most expensive homes of any town in Maine. I think that I read that in a *Down East Magazine* I found in the Monhegan schoolhouse that we are number fifteen. Wouldn't you think that intelligent people who live in million dollar retirement homes on the coast of Maine could at least pretend to be happy?

~

St. George is a peninsula about three miles wide and about fifteen miles long, which means that many, many of us pay taxes on salt water frontage. I have 500 or so feet of St. George salt water frontage and eighty acres of potential house lots that I'm desperately trying to put into

conservation before someone offers me so much money that I forget my good intentions. Salt water frontage in St. George goes up around thirty-three percent every year.

There are many rich kid homes in St. George but, according to a recent news report, some of the people in them are unhappy. Yes. These newcomers to Beals and St. George just discovered that the picturesque lobster boats they were shown in the colorful real estate brochures have 600 horsepower diesel engines. Broom, Broom, Broom. Big surprise. Lobster boats are not bobbing around out there in the harbor just to give tourists and year-round summer people something to photograph and paint.

And, by the way, Andy Wyeth, who has worked in St. George for over eighty years, is clever enough to avoid these trite harbor scenes. Andy won't paint a boat until it is surrounded by weeds and rotting in your dooryard.

Lobster boats are tools that are used at sunrise broom, broom, broom on the coast of Maine. Then there are the bait trucks that go by your house, which is the coastal equivalent of living next to the mill in Rumford. In case you tuned in late, bait is the dead fish they stuff in traps to attract lobsters. You've heard Gary Crocker call it Sushie. Some people from away don't like the smell of bait but I do, probably because I was brought up with it.

Anyway, according to the news report, coastal towns like St. George and Beals are now warning potential shore property buyers that lobster boats make noise at the crack of dawn. Although I didn't hear it on the news, they should also mention that stern men drive through town a half hour before dawn on their motorcycles.

~

My neighbor Jimmy Parker, whose years of working in boatyards has made him a keen political observer, says that he's seen a sure sign that our property taxes are going up again. Three people brought quiche to the last Grange supper.

~

A realtor friend of mine has been selling real estate out of his Camden office for years. He's very successful because he works hard to please his customers. He says that the most challenging sale he ever made was a piece of woodland up in Appleton that he had listed for a Rockport woman who'd got it from her third or fourth husband. It hadn't been surveyed and there were no stone walls either, but the woman selling the property claimed that she knew the boundaries, and said that she'd mark them with rags so he could follow them.

Well, he started out by the road where she'd tied part of a red sweater to a bush, and after fifty feet he could see another part of the sweater tied on a tree. The system worked good, and before the sweater ran out it had led him about 200 yards. Then the markers turned into scraps of a red skirt, which were also easy to see, and he was able to follow them for a hundred yards or so. But when the skirt ran out, the markers turned into some very delicate underwear, and my friend says if he hadn't just attended an excellent seminar on customer service, he probably would have turned around right there and gone home.

~

My friend Richard says that for the past three years, every time we have had a pouring rain, his kids' telephone quit. Call in and you get a busy signal. Try to call out and you get nothing. Young girls could live with this for 3 years because the other phone always works. But there was wailing and gnashing of teeth in his home this week because some very important calls from important boys did not get through. Richard was asked to call the telephone's repair service and get it fixed.

After waiting his way through the telephone company's battery of answering machines, he reached a real person, gave the number of the phone, and explained that during every rainstorm we had had for the past three years, it had conked out. The nice woman on the other end asked how many phones were connected to that line and he said three.

And she said, "Did you check to see if one of them was off the hook?"

~ Humor and Aging ~

As you get older and see the way things are going, you can either get ugly or laugh. Nothing is going to change if I get ugly, so I've decided to laugh at the foolish things I see. Many of the Old People I know who are happy, like Everett Baum or Georgie Pease who are both over ninety, have a good time everywhere and are always laughing. If it works for them, it should work for me.

One of the good things about being an old man is that it keeps you off the ski slopes. Two years ago Maine had four times as many people killed on the slopes as in hunting accidents.

You might guess that I don't believe in exercise and it's because more and more people are experiencing cardiac arrest during exercise classes. If the government wants to save lives I would suggest that they fund some leisure programs. Where you'd get paid for sleeping in a rocking chair.

Every time I read about a man who dropped in his tracks during a workout at the gym I can't believe that there are old people out there who are willing to lay down their lives for physical fitness.

I once read of about a man who was 102. He bragged that he'd lived that long only because he'd had arthritis when he was a kid and had never been able to get any exercise.

Humor is one of the great coping mechanisms we have for dealing with stressful situations and the aging process. When you are at a disadvantage it is an elegant defense.

When you share a humorous experience with a person, you get in tighter with them.

Humor gives you a sense of hope. That's why companies bring me in to speak to their employees. They figure it will make them happy at the same time they are cutting back on their wages.

Humor is infectious. You can catch it most anywhere.

Some respiratory therapists tell jokes to patients so they'll clean out their lungs. Expectorate is the term they use.

Because humor is stimulating it helps older people stay alert—although it didn't work on stage with me last week. I got so interested in listening to Gary Crocker that I forgot what I was supposed to do when my turn came.

The classic bedside manner of health people has always included humor. You might wonder why humor hasn't been embraced as the main plank in some political party's platform because, like compassion, it doesn't cost anything.

You like people who are always smiling. I wish I could do it. I know one old guy who was always smiling. He'd steal most anything and you couldn't believe a word he said, but you had to like him.

Humor does help you in stressful situations and as you get older, it seems there are more and more things thrown at you, like visits to the hospital, that can cause stress.

I spoke out in Indiana and followed Dr. Sharon Yoder, an expert on humor for health, who told about humor rooms in hospitals.

Many people must think that Old age is bad because they have had to find another name for it: Senior Citizens.

Thinking that you are going to change the unpleasant characteristics of this or that social group by giving it a different name is a common thing today.

I would like to make Old Age respectable, and I can do it right now by calling Old age Old Age. I'm getting right on the edge of Old Age and I am now somewhat of a concerned party. When you say that so and so is a Senior Citizen, you are implying that there is something wrong with being OLD.

~

Names of cultural and social groups are changing so rapidly now that I suggest they have an 800 number in Washington so anyone who wants to make sure he's not insulting his neighbors can call and find out what Swedes are calling themselves nowadays. I've already inherited my father's arthritis and think it's a bunch of foolishness to believe that you can take the pain out of an Old Man's joints by calling him a Senior Citizen. If it would take the pain out of my fingers by calling me a Senior Citizen, I'd all for it.

Manure in a golden box is still manure and roses in a cracked vase are still roses.

I can remember lots of old people I liked when I was a kid and not one of them was a senior citizen.—they were all Old.

Grammy Prior said that when she was young she prayed that when she got old she wouldn't lose her mind. She said, "Now I'm beginning to wonder if it was a good idea."

Old people have power they never had when they were middle aged. In the summer you can see hundreds of them in great big campers on all of the roads in Maine. And they're going about thirty or thirty-five miles an hour. And every summer I have a contest on my radio show where my listener can win a prize for sending in a description of the camper that was holding up the most cars. For instance, one would say, I saw a New York camper between Lisbon and Lisbon Falls that was holding up twenty-seven cars. Think of how the Old Guy driving that camper must relish his power. All though life he was a nameless bureaucrat that nobody noticed but now he can look in his rear view mirror and relish the power that comes from holding up twenty-seven cars.

~ People from Away ~

Speaking of taxes, did you attend the recent town meeting where much was said about taxes?

One of the natives stood up and said, "If you people from away hadn't moved up here and put all your kids in the schools, we wouldn't have such wicked big taxes."

How do you calm down a Maine native who is so mad that blood runs out his ears?

Well, one of the people from "away" stood up and said, "If you greedy Maine people weren't stupid enough to sell us your land, we'd still be in Massachusetts."

~

A local Realtor has finally sold a drafty twelve room Victorian mansion in Rockland. When the prospective buyer mentioned that the furnace seemed to be running constantly, the Realtor smiled and replied, "That's OK, you can hardly hear it."

~

Who is pounding on my door last week but Bob Dean. I've known Bob Dean for ten, twelve years—since we were regulars at the Camden Singles' Club once a week. You might remember we used to meet in the lower part of that church right between the Camden Post Office and Brown Dog Bikes. Truman Hilt would be there and Donny Millington and Donny Rositer and myself and Bob Dean, all very appreciative of the food that the single women would put on the table. And you've heard me tell how there was a widow from the Ducktrap Condos in Lincolnville who could simply wave her hand over the wreckage of that Singles' supper and it would be cleaned up—snap—just like that. What a woman. And eating there got to be such a habit that I married her.

So Bob Dean showed up at my back door last week hoping to sell me some palm tree covered, sandy beach ocean lots he bought down in Calcoon, Mexico. If you want two or three cheap, cheap, huge house lots with sandy beach frontage on The Gulf of Mexico see Bob Dean.

You probably know that even though Bob Dean is now sixty-three, he is still an Iron Man. That's one of those triathlon people who run and canoe and bicycle, and for years Bob was the winner. Nobody could come close to him in a canoe. All they ever saw was his backside. But Bob told me that he's recently slowed down somewhat. Now, some of the stronger young women can get ahead of him in the road races. Bob says that the first time one of those young woman runners got ahead of him, he wondered why he didn't slow down years ago.

~

Off and on for several years, I have used Robert Dennison's excellent computer program to mail out the St. George High School Alumni notices. This year, as usual, the meeting is on the last Saturday night in May at the Odd Fellow's hall in Tenant's Harbor, but—earlier this year—at 5PM.

The greatest problem with keeping the mailing list up to date is the fact that the post office changed some addresses two or three times in two or three years. And people from away are running some of our local post offices. That means, that if you write to a family that has lived on the same farm down in Cushing since the Revolutionary War, you might get the letter you sent them back from the post office stamped, "Unknown," or "Not at this address."

Of course, the post office high hooters will tell you that they have shut down our local post offices and keep changing our addresses to give us better service.

My mother's cousin, Russell Williamson, sent me a 1902 post card which had been mailed from Tenants Harbor at 5AM and had been received in Rockland six hours later. Do you think that card would make it in twenty-four hours today?

The other day I was standing next to a fire engine up in Millinocket, and I chanced to notice 9-1-1 in big gold letters on the red door.

And I got to thinking that everyone—even I—know that 9-1-1 is the number you dial when you need help. And I got to thinking how lucky we are that the post office is not in charge of that 9-1-1 number, because if they were, now that we all know it, they would change it to something else—just to give us better service.

~

A month or two ago I was up in Millinocket, and someone was telling about the winter of 1933 up in the St. John River Valley. The winter had

been bad with sub zero temperatures and deep snow—as usual. A very old and tiny man who had outlived his friends and family passed away, and the undertaker was charged with storing the remains until the time when spring thaw would facilitate a burial. Unfortunately, the undertaker had put up his hearse for the winter, and he didn't want to take it out. This was a problem, because he could only legally move a body in a registered hearse.

But the people of the St. John River valley are a resourceful bunch. And the undertaker said, "He was just a little fellow, so I folded him up and braced him up in the back seat of my car. I put a hat on him and a coat and a scarf. All braced up against the seat nobody could tell. But we only went a little ways when we slid right off the road into a snow bank.

"Just then my cousin comes along and he helps me out of the car. And I'm standing there trying to get my breath when he opens the back door and notices that the fellow has fallen on the floor and isn't breathing. So he gets some snow and starts rubbing it on his face. And when I see what he is doing, I say, 'That won't do no good. He's been dead for three days.'"

~

Last Thursday one of my radio friends, Mike Harkins, drove down from Parsonsfield to have supper with me. Mike is a very interesting person. He's typical of those who listen to The humble Farmer on Public Radio Friday nights from seven until eight. Mike's grandfather was sheriff of Bangor, his father was a judge, his daughter has a PhD in Bio-Genetics, his son graduated from Maine Maritime and his great-aunt spent 1907 in a one-room-school on Matinicus in an early attempt to civilize the populace.

Mike's son, the merchant marine, was thinking about buying a piece of land, but someone from Massachusetts got ahead of him. Later, Mike heard that when the Realtor and the Massachusetts buyer went over to look at the property, they parked in the driveway of the man who owned the land next to it. Of course, when the neighbor saw two men get out of a car in his driveway he came out of his house and asked if he could do anything for them.

You probably won't believe this, but the Massachusetts man said that it was a private conversation and that it was none of his business.

Well, in spite of that you will be glad to hear that this story has a happy ending. The Realtor got his money because the man from Massachusetts bought the land. And then the man from Massachusetts discovered that the only way he could get power was to ask his neighbor if he could run the poles across his neighbor's land.

~

Welcome to Maine, out of state friends, and thank you for watching The humble Farmer here on Channel 9. You've probably driven up here and hope to eat a few lobsters, visit a few stores and look at the ocean.

Which reminds me of the most interesting Old Broad Bay Bund und Blatt I've ever seen. The Bund und Blatt is a newsletter about the German Colony established down in the Waldoboro area back around 1742. And many of us who are descended from those original Manks and Overlocks and Hoffseses and Creamers and Hilts and Genthners find it interesting reading.

Among other interesting things in there this month is the diary of Lt. William Farnsworth, who "set out for home with two bottles of gin" on Christmas Eve in 1777. He only made twenty miles the first day because he "spraint" his knee. By January fourth he "could not go no further by reason of a wood A Head eleven miles Long." He ended up coming home by boat.

Things don't seem to have changed much in Maine over the past 200 years. Drive from Brunswick to Machias and you'll have to admit that we still have so many trees that if you're more than fifty feet from the high water mark, it's usually impossible to see the ocean.

~

If you have driven Route One in Warren, you're aware that the people who live on that road do not want the highway department to widen and straighten the road. My Wife Marsha, The Almost Perfect Woman, and I were driving home from a show I did for Old Bristol Days, when we saw all the protest signs. And in one place where there is a blind corner I said to Marsha, "It is not safe to drive the posted speed limit here. If anything were in the road when I came around this corner traveling at the posted speed limit, there is no way in the world I could stop. I would hit it."

My friends in Warren—I fully sympathize with your position. But, I think you know that when the state has widened and straightened that road, it will be a safer road. Because—the highway department will do the exact same thing in Warren that they did thirty years ago in St. George when they ran route 131 right through the center of my house. As soon as the state creates a wide, straight road on which it is safe to drive seventy miles an hour through a village, they drop the speed limit to thirty-five.

~

A fellow over in Cushing, who has been living with his young children, told his sister that he was looking for someone special. She said, "I don't know why my brother needs somebody special. He's already got his two kids—he could round out that little group with anybody for a weekend."

~

When Winky was a high school senior, he drove a Camden freshman girl home. On the doorstep she blushed and asked that he not tell anyone that he brought her home. He said, "Don't worry, I'm just as ashamed of it as you are."

~

You'll find people of all ages over at Sandy Shores Campground, which means that the residents have had to set up regulations, so the young people won't be singing around campfires at three in the morning.

Winky attended a meeting there when many of the new owners discussed these tentative regulations and someone asked if they could have a breeding operation.

Winky said, "How are you going to stop it in a campground?"

~

There's nothing some Maine natives enjoy more than answering a tourist's question with a question. A fellow from New York pulls up beside Winky on Route 131 in Tenants Harbor and says, "Which way to the ocean?" And Winky says, "Which one?"

~

You might not believe this, but I can't remember anything anymore. You might remember me telling you that a month or two ago I volunteered to do a talk for Bob Spear who was running for some office down in Damariscotta. They were going to tape my show and play it on the cable channel down there in Damariscotta. But I forgot to go. They called me up after it was over and asked where I was. Well, I felt bad—I felt foolish—there was nothing I could do. I sent Bob a respectable contribution for his political campaign, but it didn't' make me feel any better. I mentioned this to David Bright the other day and asked him what he would have done. He said, "Well, I would have sent Bob the contribution, but I would also have sent a similar amount to the Alzheimer's Foundation."

~

Did you see the lobster protesters from California marching at the lobster festival in Rockland? The next day I saw a protester eating a hamburger in McDonald's which puzzled me, until someone explained that they really don't contain enough meat to count.

~

Everyone has forgotten who the involved parties are, so I can now tell you about it. Last summer a yuppie came into Camden Harbor on his big

yacht and didn't want to tie up to the mooring because it looked rather shabby. His wise old father said to him, "Look—tie up to it—everything in Maine always looks like that but it always works."

~

Here in Maine there's not that much difference between a developer and an environmentalist. A developer wants to build a house on the ocean. An environmentalist already has a house on the ocean.

~

My cousin Truman Hilt says that years ago you could go to a soup kitchen where they'd preach to you for half an hour and then give you a bowl of soup.

He says that things are even worse in Maine today. You can't get at the wine and cheese at a party unless you first listen to a hippie playing folk music on a guitar.

~

No matter what your business, you need the best tools you can get. Maine men know that if you buy the best tools and keep them in top notch condition, you can always find somebody who will want to borrow them.

~

Believe it or not, some Maine people try to act as if they were hippie carpetbaggers from California. It's easy to spot them. They're the people who talk like I do, but lap the food off their fingers when they eat.

~

Living on the coast of Maine can be a challenge. Let's take a specific example. What do you do if you live within sight of the famous Olsen house, and seventy-five yachts from New Jersey anchor beside your back yard?

You might look out and think that it's a mighty pretty sight. But if you've seen yachts anchor there before, you know you could be looking at trouble, because most of those people on the yachts are environmentally oriented. That means that they would cut off a hand before they'd throw a can, bottle or scrap of paper overboard.

But they've got to get rid of their trash somehow and you know how they do it. They lug it ashore and stack it neatly in your barn. The man who brought this to my attention said that he asked them why they were stacking their trash in his barn. And they said, "What do you do with your trash?" And he said, "I take it to the dump." And they said, "When you go there you can take ours, too."

If you've driven through parts of Philadelphia and New Jersey, you probably thought that the people who lived there were responsible for all the ankle deep trash beside the road. But now I can't help but wonder if it isn't recycled yacht trash that some old Maine lobsterman has thrown out on his way to Florida.

~

A Tenants Harbor man who was always borrowing $20 from his neighbor was once asked what he needed the money for. "Well," he said. "I can't go around broke."

~

Have you ever bought firewood and wondered if you really got a cord? Priscilla Adams said that she had some delivered that she didn't even think was wood.

~ Andy Wyeth is Trying to Save ~

When I told my old neighbor, Gramp Wiley, that I simply couldn't afford to send out Christmas cards this year, he pounded the arm of his rocker and snorted, "Saving on Christmas messages is nothing new. Andy Wyeth has been doing it for years."

You might know that every day in the summer Andy Wyeth loads a couple of dogs in his car, drives up to Thomaston and then right down by my house on his way to Port Clyde where he works in his father's old studio. And he's driving a gold plated Stutz with musical horns. So I didn't think he could be much of a scrimper and saver, and I said so.

My neighbor leaned back in his rocker, closed his eyes, and spoke like The Ghost of Christmas Past. "Forty or so years ago Andy pounded at my back door and asked if I'd give him a hand. His car had sunk into a soft spot out in my field. You know how he's still always driving around back roads and even places where there are no roads, hoping he'll see some young woman sleeping in a blueberry field.

"It was pouring rain and he was soaked to the skin, so I got him over against the stove and got some hot coffee into him. Andy decided he could get along without a car for a day, so I gave him a ride home.

"The next day I pulled him out with my old truck. It was no bother, but Andy was grateful—every Christmas since then he's sent me a card."

I said, "That don't sound like Andy's trying to save."

"He's trying to save," Gramp shouted. "Anybody else with his amount of money would buy me a nice Hallmark card, but all I get from him are these big homemade things he paints himself."

~ Life in the Breakdown Lane ~

"We live in an unusual place," my neighbor Gramp Wiley said as he drummed his fingers on the arms of his rocking chair. "This afternoon I heard about a writer who is up to his neck in a story, but he can't find a newspaper editor in this state who will even talk about publishing it—it's about a woman who is suspected of strangling her husband."

"Around here that's really not news," I dryly observed.

Gramp pursed his lips and continued, "If that woman were running for President, every big newspaper in the country would fight for the right to put out the story first."

"When it comes to the antics of the rich and famous, a big paper can't lose by publishing first and checking the facts later," I agreed.

"Let's be honest," Gramp said. "We live in a very backward part of the country. Almost anywhere else you can step out of your house and get shot by a mugger."

As usual, I had to agree with my old neighbor. Step out on your doorstep here, wave a white mitten at your neighbor, and he's likely to shoot you for a deer.

"And we get the same tiresome news day after day," he groaned. "Bush this, Bush that."

"I heard that Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford made a special visit to offer him some advice."

Gramp threw his head back and laughed—a dry, humorless laugh. "That's like the Captain of the Titanic dropping in to offer sailing tips. Were they invited or was there just nobody man enough at the door to turn them away?"

"Then there's our town dump."

"We call it a landfill today," I said quite correctly.

Gramp Wiley sneered. "What an expensive, inefficient way to dispose of trash. Every up-to-date city on the eastern seaboard dumps everything way out to sea where it won't bother anyone."

"I saw a cartoon that said, 'I'm sorry doctor, we won't be ready to operate until some more surgical supplies wash up on the beach.'"

"That's certainly true. I've put some thought into our trash problem and have come up with a practical solution."

I raised my eyebrows and looked interested.

"Black Holes," Gramp said evenly.

"What's a Black Hole?"

"According to a science program I saw on Channel 10, a Black Hole eats everything that you drop into it. I have a small one that drifts around in this trailer gobbling up pencils, small change, soap and extra light bulbs. Once a Black Hole muckles onto something you never see it again. I was telling Old Tom about them on the CB yesterday and he said it must have been a Black Hole that got his new teeth."

"But we're talking about mountains of trash," I exclaimed.

Gramp dismissed my protest with a wave of his hand. "The way I understand Black Holes, they'll put a car crusher to shame. Your average Black Hole can take a ball of trash as big as the sun, and squeeze it down to the size of a mustard seed."

I considered the parable and said, "Every year one of the trash haulers dumps a little too close to the edge of the landfill and over goes the whole business. They'll want more money before backing up to a Black Hole."

"Delivery could be tricky," he admitted, "but something has to be done soon. Over the past few years these growing landfills have increased the circumference of the earth to the point where the earth's gravitational pull is now double what it used to be."

Gramp paused dramatically before continuing: "It now takes me twice the effort it once did just to get up out of my chair."

"You're right again," I exclaimed. "I feel the effects on my own body. It's been years since I've been able to tie my shoes without sitting down."

~ The Car Shuffle ~

Winter is especially hard on me. Snow piles up on all four sides of my house, which makes my daily trip around it really tough.

Oh, there's no getting out of it, because someone from "away" might have ignored the well-worn summer and winter path that leads out back, and jammed an important note into the crack on my front door. Before I understood this peculiar habit of city people, months later these "we just stopped to say hi" messages would be found blowing across the lawn, all brown and wrinkled from months of sun and rain.

Then, perhaps ten years ago, I wrote a note, wrapped it in plastic, and tacked it on one of my front doors. It said, "Dear Out-Of-State Friend, This door was last opened in 1916 for Larkin Gilchrest's funeral. We simple country people always use the back door."

But after a few years the weather took that too, and the little notes appeared again, written by people from "away" who had fulfilled the obligation of a call but who were secretly relieved that I wasn't home, when I was working unnoticed on the back side of the house in the office-kitchen.

Today's walk around the house was exceptionally fruitful. By one back door I found a carton of paper left by United Parcel Service, and pasted on a front window was the notice of an attempted delivery by Federal Express.

How are deliverymen able to creep up to a front door in plain daylight and slip away undetected? Why are they never accused of disturbing the peace while "attempting" a delivery? They are all retired librarians from Boston. Federal Express would do well to trade them in for a crew of bill collectors who have worked in Eastport.

This week I'm trapped in a car shuffle so I'm in the mood to gnash my teeth and speculate why that Federal Express delivery wasn't made. Because I was expecting a package, when the sticker appeared on my window I called my friend and asked him to send me another copy in the U. S. mail—so I'd be sure to have it in the morning.

Yes, this week I'm involved in a family car shuffle that would confuse an income tax expert. You know how innocently those car shuffles start. But then they continue until they've sucked in everyone in sight, much like a black hole.

This time it was my brother Jim's kid, Lizzy, who noticed that the tail-lights weren't working on a car she'd just bought here and taken down to school in Boston.

Fortunately, the warranty on the car hadn't run out, so she asked her stepmother, Doreen, to drive the car home from Boston this weekend so she could have the repair done free. So Doreen left her car in Boston and drove Lizzy's car home.

Then the car shuffle got complicated. Doreen's nieces wanted to go to the movies, so Doreen said to Jim, "I'll take your truck over to mother's with the nieces and you take Lizzie's car up and leave it at the garage. I'll leave the truck at mother's and borrow her car, because we can all fit in it, and we'll pick you up and all go to the movies in that. Afterwards, we'll bring her car down here and tomorrow morning I can take it back to her place and drive your truck back to Boston. On Monday you'll have to get Miss Buchannan to come down and pick you up and take you to school."

Jim called Miss Buchannan, who had to report in at five minutes to seven because she had early duty, and he was somehow able to crawl out early enough to get to work with her.

Then, after school, Miss Buchannan took him over to the garage where he picked up Lizzie's car.

Jim drove Lizzie's car home, but then he didn't have a have a truck to haul his lawnmower, so he borrowed mine—which sucked me into the car shuffle. It's very embarrassing because now I have to drive my car, which is over fourteen years old and well past the age when most cars have been crushed for scrap.

Next weekend Doreen has to drive Jim's truck home from Boston and then drive Lizzie's car back, which is when I'll be able to use my truck again.

Jim asked the guy in the garage what he had to do to Lizzie's car and he said he had to replace two tail light bulbs. But Lizzie got them before the warranty ran out which was a lucky thing because they didn't cost her a cent.

~ The Deep Monhegan Blues ~

"Now when you go down to Monhegan
Put your money in your shoes,
'Cause them women on Monhegan
Got them deep Monhegan Blues."

Ballad by Bertie Simmons & Levi Hupper

If you've been everywhere in the world, if you've seen every strange sight there is to see and if you think you've done everything there is to do, I suggest you go down to Monhegan.

I'm talking about a small island ten miles or so off the coast of Maine. Every day in the summer fifty to one hundred Boston or New York people wind their way north on old Route One, gift shop capital of the world, and about seventy miles up from Portland they hang a right at Thomaston. From there it's a straight fourteen-mile run down through St. George to the fishing village of Port Clyde. In Port Clyde, which is just as far as any sober citizen has ever driven an automobile, they drag their duffel bags down to the dock and board Jim Barstow's *Laura B*, which is another name for the Monhegan Boat.

Then two or three dozen of them, who have obviously never set foot on Maine salt water before, find a comfortable spot on deck, peel off their shirts, turn their faces up to the sun, and wait. Two or three natives wink at each other and watch with interest.

The *Laura B* gets underway. As she plows past Hupper's Island, thin, white hands rub nervously at goose bumps which have mysteriously appeared on arms and legs, for this is July and last night it was 110 degrees almost everywhere else in the northern hemisphere.

Ten minutes later, between Allen's Island and Burnt Island, women are digging out sweaters and orange slickers. Some move back aft into the cabin to get out of the bone-chilling fog and spray. Ten minutes later and twenty easy minutes from Monhegan, even the jocks have dug out sweaters or have gone inside with chattering teeth.

You've been on safari in Africa, you've had reindeer pie with the Lapps, but here on the Monhegan dock is truly a unique experience. A crowd has assembled to welcome friends and you identify scraps of exotic speech patterns—Memphis, Brooklyn and West Palm Beach—as you work your way through the smiling throng, hoping to find an empty taxi.

But down on Monhegan there are no taxies for there are no roads. Two or three well-rusted pickup trucks haul freight over narrow, winding paths of rocks where mountain goats would stagger and where Sherpas would fall.

Monhegan's 150 houses sport a weather-beaten look with white trim on the windows. One looks in vain for a condominium, for thirty years ago a handful of people formed an association, which still protects the wild land on the island. Since then zoning has come in which has frozen almost everything else. Power lines from the island's generator are buried in rock. Twenty-five of the homes utilize solar power.

Looks like a strange settlement, you say? Perhaps so, but walk back into the woods on one of the rocky trails for one of the creepiest, most unsettling experiences to be found in the world today: One can walk for miles through rotting, moss-covered spruces without seeing a McDonald's wrapper or shake container.

You walk quietly, preserving a religious silence, as you pass through the sylvan glens and along the rocky cliffs, for two or three hundred tight-lipped Monhegan artists are standing elbow to elbow, daubing away at any given daylight hour.

"No wonder," you exclaim. "Who could help being moved to such an outpouring of expression by the natural beauty which everywhere abounds?"

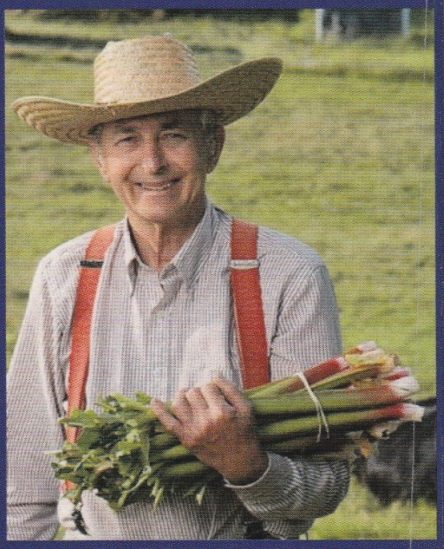
But the truly analytical mind will point out that this is not necessarily so—on Monhegan there is really nothing else to do.

You dig in your wallet and bring out a small scrap of paper. A friend has insisted that you call upon his old buddy, Cudmore Watson. Although Cudmore is expecting you, the doors are locked and the shades are drawn. You knock. A front shade moves just a crack—the door is opened, a hoarse voice hisses, "In, quickly," and the door is slammed behind you.

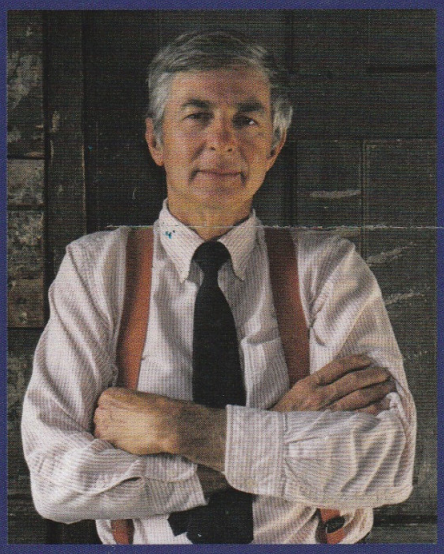
Cudmore is glad to see you. He is a warm, friendly man who is obviously well thought of in his little community, for his walls are completely covered with autographed works of art.

"Every time I do a favor for someone," he explains, "they bring me a painting. Now I like paintings, but my house is getting jammed with them—there simply isn't room for one more. No, I can't sell them or give them away because there might be hard feelings when they're missed. That's why my doors are all closed and the shades are drawn this afternoon. You see, yesterday I loaned Jamie Wyeth my wheelbarrow and Jim just called to tell me that Jamie is heading this way with a painting under his arm."

Robert Skoglund, perhaps better known as "The humble Farmer," lives in St. George, Maine where he was born, brought up, and still lives. humble has been profiled in *Yankee* magazine and featured in a *Boston Herald* cover story, which called him "New England's answer to Garrison Keillor."



A tireless recorder of dry wit, humble's humor has appeared in over fifty newspapers. In addition, he has shared his wit and wisdom on countless public stages as well as at professional meetings where he was the after dinner speaker. For over twenty-nine years humble's radio program, "The humble Farmer," featured "old-fashioned music" and humorous social commentary, and was broadcast on public radio in Maine and elsewhere.



This book is but a very small collection of pieces written by humble over the past decades.

$15.95

ISBN 9781973890652